Transit Tehran

Young Iran and Its Inspirations

Malu Halasa and Maziar Bahari, Editors

Prince Claus Fund Library

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Contributors

Kian Amani won the *Best Young Talent Award* in the Third Kaveh Golestan Photojournalism Award in 2006 for his photo essay 'The Best Years of Our Lives'. Since 2005, he has been the photographer and editor for the Iranian Artists' Forum (IAF) and from 2004–06 the photographer for the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue, both institutes in Tehran. He has directed five documentary films and was the photo editor at *Entekhab* daily newspaper from 2001–04. His other awards include runner-up for the 2006 First Sculpture Symposium of Tehran and the 2007 City, Ugly and Beautiful, both competitions held by Tehran Municipality.

Asieh Amini is a journalist and editor of the website *Zanan* (www.zanan.co.ir). In 2004 she broke the story of the execution of sixteen-year-old Atefah Sahaaleh, which contravened the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights that Iran had earlier signed. She covers women's issues in Iran and has been arrested several times.

Emadeddin Baghi, author and head of the Organisation for the Defence of Prisoners' Rights, was released from prison due to medical treatment. He was named 2008 International Journalist of the Year by the British Press Awards. Baghi, who was the editor of *Jomhouriat* newspaper until the authorities closed it down in 2004, was imprisoned in 2007 for 'activities against national security' and 'publicity in favour of the regime's opponents' because his articles in *Jomhouriat* called for the defence of people sentenced to death in Iran's Khuzestan province. In 2000, he was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison, which was reduced to three years on appeal, for 'attacking national security' after his book *The Tragedy of Democracy in Iran* (1998) linked the government to the assassinations of Iranian intellectuals. He has written twenty books – six of which have been banned.

Rakhshan Bani Etemad began her distinguished film career as a documentary filmmaker for the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. Following years as an assistant director and in continuity, she directed her first feature film *Off Limits* in 1987. Social and women's themes run dominant in her work. She went on to direct *Canary Yellow* (1989), *Foreign Exchange* (1990), *Nargess* (1992) and *The Blue-Veiled,* which in 1995 was awarded the Bronze Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival. She serves as a member of the jury on local and international festivals.

Parsua Bashi started work as a graphic designer while still a student during the Iran–Iraq War. From 1996, she began designing book covers, posters and brochures for Iranian publishers and for events organised by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation. Participating in every Biennale of Iranian Graphic Art since its inception in 1986 at Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art, she published her first illustrated book *A Baby's First-Year Calendar of Memories* in 1999. She was awarded a Letter of Appreciation from both the Iranian Graphic Designers Association and the Tehran International Book Fair. Her first graphic novel *Nylon Road* (Kein & Aber Publishing, 2006) was initially published in German, with English and Spanish translations due out in 2008, and received an award from the Art Council of Switzerland in 2005. She has been living in Zurich since 2004.

Masoud Behnoud has founded more than twenty newspapers and magazines since he began as a prominent writer, journalist and editor in 1964. He was the editor-in-chief from 1971 of Iran's most influential and popular daily, *Ayandegan*, when on orders of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 it was closed, and its editor and senior staff imprisoned. The same year, he became chief editor of the weekly *Tehran-e Mosavar,* which was also shut down after thirty issues by the Islamic authorities. In 1985 he was one of the founders of the social and literary monthly *Adineh*, which championed freedom of expression for thirteen years. In 1995 he joined the Tehran daily *Jame'eh.* When this was closed down, he worked on other dailies: *Tous, Neshat, Asr-e Azadegan,* and *Bonyan*, all of which were closed down. In 1999, he was imprisoned for 'provoking public opinion' and 'insulting the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic', a sentence protested by Reporters San Frontières, International PEN and Amnesty International. The author of innumerable books, he currently lives in London.

Soheila Beski writes novels and short stories. She has published three short-story collections, two of them – *Pareh kochak* ('Small Pieces', Agah Publications, Tehran, 2002) and *Bibi pick* ('Queen of Spades', Nilofar Publications, Tehran, 2006) – in Iran. (The third collection was not published due to censorship.) Three of her novels were published abroad also because of censorship: *Gosashteai hast keh nemigozard* ('Past Times That Refuse to Pass Away', Baran Publications, Sweden, 1991); *Dar hekayat sakhtan mabal dar Bam* ('The Tale of Building Latrines in Bam', BM-Druckservice, Cologne, 2006); *Dar mohagh* ('Eclipsed', BM-Druckservice, Cologne, 2006). She translated *Virginia Woolf* by Quentin Bell and *Living My Life, the Autobiography of Emma Goldman* into Farsi. Presently she is the editor of *Memar* ('Architect') magazine.

Janne Bjerre Christensen is a Danish anthropologist who has been working on Iran for the past ten years. She is a graduate of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies and the University of Copenhagen. In 1998–9 she conducted eight months of fieldwork in Isfahan, focusing on youth, marriage, sexuality and family politics. Since then she has been back to Iran several times as a journalist and researcher, writing about political developments, social movements and civil society there. Currently she is doing her PhD at Roskilde University, Denmark, on Iranian drug policies and the involvement of NGOs.

Eugenie Dolberg is a photographer and the founder and director of Open Shutters. She has organised projects in Asia and the Middle East. She started working with participatory photography in Cambodia and went on to create Open Shutters, a programme to train women to share their experiences through photography and writing, in Iraq and Syria. She is based in Tehran and London.

Thomas Dworzak is a German photographer. He became a member of Magnum in 2004. Based in Paris and New York, he contributes to *The New Yorker, Newsweek, US News and World Report, Paris-Match, The New York Times Magazine* and *Time.* He has won numerous prizes and awards, including World Press First Prize (Spot News Story) and Kodak Young Photographer of the Year. He has also been exhibited in several galleries and museums including the Musée de l'Elysée, the Leica Gallery and Maison Doisneau. His book *Taliban* was published by Trolley Books in 2003.

Coco Ferguson moved to Tehran in 2003 to study the *Taziyeh,* which consists of mourning rituals for Imam Hossein and unique plays performed in Iran to mark his death. She has travelled extensively in the country, researching the performances and music of the *Taziyeh.* In particular she explores comparisons between the political and ritualistic role of religious drama in Iran and the role of theatre in ancient Greece. She is completing an MA in International Relations and Iranian Studies at Tehran University and is a regular contributor to *Bidoun.*

Samaneh Ghadarkhan graduated from secondary school in 1996 before going on to study communications with an interest in journalism. During university, she started working at *Akhabr* newspaper and went on to contribute to *Hayate No. Nourooz, Bahar,* and *Shargh,* all of which have been banned in recent years. Her last job was as deputy media secretary in the society section of the newspaper *Hammihen.*

Kaveh Golestan was an internationally renowned photojournalist who worked for *Time Magazine* and other international publications. He was awarded a Robert Capa Gold Medal in 1979. He was one of the first photographers to document Saddam Hussein's nerve gas attack on Halabja, in Southern Kurdistan. Banned from working for two years by the Iranian authorities, he taught photography at the University of Tehran. In the 1990s, he traded stills for moving images and became the BBC cameraman in Iran. He died on 2 April 2003 while on assignment for the BBC in Kifri, northern Iraq, when he stepped on a landmine. He was fifty-two years old.

Mehrak Golestani, also known as Reveal, is a rapper in London. His group Poisonous Poets has been signed by both major and independent UK record labels and featured on national radio including regular airplay on BBC Radio 1 and 1extra.

Khosrow Hassandazeh served in the Iranian army during the Iran–Iraq War. Afterwards he sold fruit and vegetables at a city market while studying art and literature at university. He began exhibiting in 1991 in Tehran. A solo exhibition in 1999 at Diorama Arts, London, introduced his work and led to further showings at the British Museum, the World Bank and the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. He has been the subject of several documentaries by Maziar Bahari and the BBC. A retrospective exhibition of his work took place in 2006 at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

Peyman Hooshmandzadeh is a photographer and writer. His photojournalism has been published in Iranian newspapers and by Western news agencies including Reuters and Panos in London. The photo editor of *Goonagoon* newspaper, he is one of the founders of the 135 PHOTOS agency in Tehran. His short stories have been published in *Gardoon Literary Monthly, Fiction and Literature, Negah No* and *Asr Panj Shanbeh*, among other publications. His short story collections include *Two Dots* (2000), *Two Sundays Meet* (2001) and *Alcoholism* (2004).

Roya Karimi has been a journalist in Iran since 1991. She has written for the reformist newspapers *Jame'eh*; *Tous*; *Khordad*; *Norooz*; *Yaas no*; and *Eghbal*, all of which have been closed down by Iranian authorities. She wrote for *Zanan* magazine.

Zohreh Khoshnamak has been working for the past eighteen years as a reporter, features writer, editor and editor-in-chief for more than twenty-five daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and publications. She has also worked for news agencies including Iran Youth News Agency where, with other reporters, she started a desk devoted to social problems. The desk was closed down after reporters broke a story on the trafficking of Iranian women and girls. Now a freelance writer, she has also taken up photography. She writes, 'I belong to that generation of Iranian journalists who experienced the height of Iranian journalism in the country's most distinguished newspapers, and am now experiencing its decline in a time of censorship and restrictions.'

Abbas Kowsari who started working as a photojournalist in 1994 with the *Tehran Times Daily,* is the photo editor of *Shargh*, a pioneering reformist newspaper in Iran. He has worked for more than twelve newspapers, ten of which the Iranian authorities banned from publishing for four years. He has also worked with several foreign photo agencies such as Vu and

Polaris Images, and presently works for the Spanish photo agency Granagular. Kowsari's photographs have been published by *The Times*, *Paris-Match*, *Der Spiegel* and *Colors*. His exhibitions include *Muslims Muslims* (La Villette, Paris, 2004); *Portraits* (French Cultural Centre, Damascus, 2003); and *Iran Contemporary Photographers* (Asar Gallery, Tehran, 2002).

Alireza Mahmoodi-Iranmehr writes fiction, radio plays and literary criticism. He published his first short stories in 1990 and has since written for many literary publications in Tehran. His story *Abre Sorati* ('Pink Cloud') won First Prize in the *Bahram Sadeghi* Awards, and he has gone on to win many other literary festival awards. In 2003, he received his first award for playwriting for radio. His books include the collection of short stories *Berim Khooshgozaroni* ('Let's Have Fun', Roshangaram, 2005) and an analysis of the poetry of Saeb Tabrizi, *Safare Gerdbad* ('Whirlwind Trouble', Institute of Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, 2006). He also contributed to *Yade Hedayat*, in memory of the Iranian writer Sadegh Hedayat.

Viveca Mellegard who was born in Tehran and lives in London, is a documentary filmmaker and writer. For the BBC, she has worked in arts, history and current affairs, and produced films for the science series *Horizon* and the flagship strand, *Timewatch*. She finished filming a documentary about a road trip in classic cars running on waste grease from restaurants and Willie Nelson's biodiesel, from Washington DC to Costa Rica. She is now developing two projects close to her Swedish-Iranian roots: *Persian Carpet*, about a cousin living in Iran, and *Building Bridges*, the story of her Swedish architect grandfather, Jacob Mellegard, about whom she writes in *Transit Tehran*.

Ardeshir Mohassess was born in Rasht, Iran in 1938 and is an illustrator and cartoonist. He graduated from Tehran University in 1962 with a degree in political science. He has held several solo exhibitions in Tehran since first becoming an illustrator and cartoonist for *Kayhan* and other local periodicals in 1963. Since then, his work has appeared in both Iranian and Western magazines including *The New Yorker*. His drawings were widely exhibited in Iran until the 1979 Revolution and have been exhibited abroad by private galleries as well as by several major museums. *Ardeshir Mohassess: Art and Satire in Iran* by Shirin Neshat was published in 2008.

Javad Montazeri is a founding member of the agency 135 PHOTOS, in Tehran. His work has been published by the newspapers *Gozaresh-e-rooz* and *Zan*, the magazine *Payame-emrooz* and by Reuters. He was the photo editor for the newspapers *Khordad* and *Fath*. He was exhibited in the show *Iran in the 21st Century – 12 Photographic Journeys* (University of London, 2003). Presently he photographs for international photo news agencies.

Amy Motlagh is a PhD candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, and holds an MFA degree in Creative Writing from New York University and a BA in English Literature from Pomona College in Claremont, California. Her poems have appeared in several journals and were published as a chapbook titled *The Litany of Farewells* (1997); her work has also appeared in an anthology of writing by Iranian women in the Diaspora titled *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been* (University of Arkansas Press, 2006). She is currently working on a dissertation tracing the development of feminine subjectivity in twentieth-century Persian prose fiction.

Shirin Neshat is a contemporary visual artist living in New York who is known for her work in film, video and photography. When she was seventeen, she emigrated to the US and attended the University of California at Berkeley. She returned to Iran for the first of several visits in 1986 and found the country transformed by the Islamic Revolution. Her work, she says, engages in 'universal dialogues while keeping within the specificity of the Islamic culture'.

Nicky Nodjoumi received his BA in Painting from Tehran University and his MFA from City College of New York. After graduating from CUNY in 1975, he returned to Iran with plans to teach art. Soon after the 1979 Revolution, he had a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran. Despite – or because of – critical acclaim, the show was labelled 'anti-revolutionary'; he was forced to leave Iran, and the show was brought down. Since then, he has lived and worked in New York and exhibited extensively in the US, Europe, Iran and around the world.

Mohsen Rastani is a photographer and filmmaker. His photographs have been featured in international exhibitions in Britain, Lebanon, Japan and China. In 1992 and 1993 he received awards from Epsom. He has made three war documentaries, two of which were about his hometown – *Hadis Khouninshahr* and *Khorramshahr 62*. He is presently working on *Eastern Panorama*, a seven-episode serial on Malaysia for the Alalam television network. He also serves on the editorial board of Iran's respected visual arts magazine, *Tasvir*. In 2006, the magazine *Aks* ('Picture') published a book of his photographs.

Majid Saeedi has been a professional photographer for eighteen years. His photographs have been published in international publications, including *Time Magazine*. He has been picture editor of eight Iranian newspapers and also picture editor for the Fars News Agency (FNA) and Getty Images. He has won many international photographic competitions, including the first Kaveh Golestan Award in 2004, and first and third places in the Breaking News category of the 2002 International Photography Awards. Saeedi has also exhibited in twenty exhibitions, both group and retrospective.

Omid Salehi has worked for the Iranian newspapers *Asre Azadegan*, *Neshat*, *Akhbare Eghtesad*, *Jame Jam*, *Tose-e*, *Aeineye Jonoob*, *Bonyan*, *Hamshahri*, *Yase no* and *Vaghye Ettefaghie*. He has also contributed to the British political journal *Index on Censorship*, and has participated in numerous exhibitions. Salehi won the Kaveh Golestan Photojournalism Award, 2004–5. His in-depth photographic essays are part of an ongoing documentary series about Iran.

Newsha Tavakolian has been working as a photographer in the Iranian press since she was sixteen. In 2002 she began to work internationally, covering Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Her photographs have been published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Stern*, *The New York Times* and *Le Figaro*. In 2003 she was runner-up for the Picture of the Year award, magazine features. In 2005 she and nine other women photographers were featured in a special issue of Marie Claire (US edition). In 2006 she was selected as Best Young Photographer of the Year by *National Geographic* and for a master class by World Press Photo. She is represented by Polaris Images in New York (www.polarisimages.com).

Sadegh Tirafkan trained as a photographer at the University of Fine Arts in Tehran. He has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions since the late 1980s at various museums and galleries including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran; the VU Gallery, Paris; and the Lehmann Maupin Gallery and Massound Nader Gallery, New York. In 2006, a monograph of his work, *Iranian Man*, was published by Belgium's La Lettre volée. His latest exhibition, *Whispered Secrets – Murmuring Dreams*, was featured at the Mall Galleries, London, the first in a series of collaborative projects with the Day Gallery, Tehran. Tirafkan currently divides his time between Tehran and Toronto.

Roxanne Varzi is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Irvine and a Senior Visiting Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford. She has a PhD in anthropology from Columbia University and was the first person since the Islamic Revolution to be awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to do original research in Iran (2000). She was a Woodrow Wilson Postdoctoral Fellow at New York University's International Center for Advanced Studies and most recently a lecturer at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. In 2006, her book *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom* was published by Duke University Press.

Octavio Zaya is an art critic and independent curator who has lived in New York since 1978. An advisor for both MUSAC (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León) and Perfoma in New York, he is the codirector of *Atlántica*, a bilingual quarterly magazine of art and culture; an editorial board member of *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art;* and a correspondent for *Flash Art*. He has written and contributed to numerous books on contemporary and emerging issues and artists, including *Fresh Cream* (Phaidon, London, 2000). As codirector, he has curated the First Biennial of Photography in Petach-Tikva, Israel, 2008.

Editors

Maziar Bahari is a documentary filmmaker and journalist. His films include *And Along Came a Spider*, *Targets: Reporters in Iraq*, *The Voyage of the Saint Louis*, and *Greetings from Sadr City*. He is *Newsweek's* correspondent in Iran and has written for the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *New Statesman*. His plays include 'A Fairly Justified Revenge' and 'Romance in Abu Ghraib'. He divides his time between Tehran, London and Baghdad as well as Bujumbura, Kigali and Goma, where he organises drumming festivals celebrating peace and reconciliation in East Africa's Lake Region.

Malu Halasa is an editor and writer. She is coauthor of *Creating Spaces of Freedom: Culture in Defiance* (Saqi Books/Prince Claus Fund Library 2002); *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images* (Saqi Books, 2004); *Kaveh Golestan 1950–2003: Recording the Truth in Iran* (Hatje Cantz/Prince Claus Fund Library, 2007); and *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design* (Chronicle Books/Prince Claus Fund Library, 2008). Former editor of the Prince Claus Fund Library (2000–4) and a founding editor of *Tank* magazine (1998–2002), she writes for the British press.

Assistant Editors

Mitchell Albert is a London-based freelance book and magazine editor. He is the editor of *PEN International* and an associate editor of *Steppe*, a new magazine focusing on Central Asia. He has edited for a number of publishing houses, magazines and nonprofit organisations in the UK, US and elsewhere.

Hengameh Golestan, considered a pioneer among Iranian women photographers, has documented life in Iran for the past twenty-eight years. Her work has been exhibited both at home and abroad. Married to the late photojournalist Kaveh Golestan, she runs the Kaveh Golestan Estate and the Kaveh Golestan Photojournalism Award with her son Mehrak Golestani.

Translation

Nilou Mobasser is an occasional contributor to *Index on Censorship*. She translated *From Palace to Prison* by Ehsan Naraghi (IB Tauris, London, 1994).

Fourteen million people live on top of treasure—despite predictions that Tehran's earthquake will prove to be history's most devastating natural disaster. *History of Tehran*, p.13

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Satirical, emotional, nostalgic, tragic and realistic is how the contributors of this book interpret modern day life in Tehran, the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In *Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations*, thirty Iranian and international photographers, reporters and writers with inside knowledge of the city share their experiences with the outside world. Like 75 percent of Iranians, many of the contributors to *Transit Tehran* are under thirty-five. They represent a generation with strong emotional and social attachments to their culture and religion while being critical of the Iranian government's censorship of arts and culture.

Transit Tehran is a portrait of a country in transition, one which is largely misunderstood by the outside world. As one of the contributors who wishes to remain anonymous puts it, 'Iran is moving from something like a traditional society to something resembling a modern one!' In the short stories, art and photography in the book, we witness a clash of traditional and modern values which dominate the daily lives of artists and intellectuals everyday. Yet *Transit Tehran* also includes more immediate concerns such as fear of arrest and imprisonment. As the same anonymous author admits, 'Working in Iran is like walking on a tightrope. You always have to be careful not to fall down, especially if you are critical of something in the country. You always have to be careful who you're dealing with, or who will be the people who may take you to court and make complaints about you.' Although the atmosphere in the city isn't as stifling as it was two decades ago, the author explains, 'A woman is never sure whether she can be stopped on the street by the moral police or not. Artists and intellectuals may never be incarcerated but they can always expect unfriendly calls at midnight to be interrogated or appear in court. Authoritarian regimes like insecurity. The real threat is not as important as the perceived one.'

Like most authoritarian governments, the Islamic Republic is deeply insecure about its legitimacy. And anyone who questions its authority, or is even indifferent to it, can be regarded as a threat. The Iranian authors and photographers presented in *Transit Tehran* insist that they are apolitical but the very fact that they do not subscribe to the 'official' approach to arts and culture in the Islamic Republic can make their lives difficult in their country. The challenge for many authors is how to avoid self-censorship while avoiding government censors at the same time. They do not always win the battle. Over all, between them, *Transit Tehran* writers worked in about fifty magazines and newspapers which were closed down for threatening 'the psychological security of the society' and showing the Islamic Republic of Iran in a 'black light' and 'weakening military and revolutionary institutions'. Over the period that the book has been put together, some of the contributors have been arrested and imprisoned at the time of writing.

Regarding journalism as a threat is not a recent phenomenon in Iran. Late photographer Kaveh Golestan, whose images from Shahr-e No (Tehran's Red Light district) feature in the book, faced censorship before the 1979 Islamic Revolution and then again wrote about it in the 1990s[1] more than a decade after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. *Transit Tehran's* photography and art are a contemporary depiction of Tehran that draws on Iran's rich cultural and visual heritage. Throughout the country's long history of political turmoil, the arts have traditionally been a place of resistance. We are proud to include Iran's pre-eminent cartoonist Ardeshir Mohassess (who is introduced by Shirin Neshat).

1 Kaveh Golestan, 'Recording the Truth in Iran' in *Kaveh Golestan 1950–2003: Recording the Truth in Iran* (Stuttgart/The Hague: Hatje Cantz/Prince Claus Fund Library, 2007), p.26.

Mohassess's illustrations are some of the most scathing criticisms of monarchist despotism in pre-revolutionary Iran.

Under any regime where dissent isn't tolerated, metaphor becomes a strategy. Photographer Javad Montazeri ponders the issue of restriction by capturing women swimming in the Caspian Sea in full veil. In his notes, he writes that he takes his seven-year-old daughter to the Caspian beach of his childhood because in two years' time she too will have to swim with a headscarf. Veteran editor and journalist Masoud Behnoud begins his history of Tehran with buried treasure. Metaphors play an important role in how *Transit Tehran* contributors interpret the way in which government officials glorify war and martyrdom. Photojournalist Majid Saeedi prefers to stay neutral while documenting a theatrical demonstration of *estesh-haddion* (martyrdom seekers) — men and women willing to die for their country and their brethren in the Muslim world. Meanwhile, in a series of sardonic portraits entitled 'Guys in the Hood', artist and war veteran Khosrow Hassanzadeh paints his friends and relatives in the style of government murals of martyrs of the Imposed War, as the eight-year war with Iraq is officially called in Iran.

The citizens' contrasting behaviour in their public and private spaces is yet another defence mechanism against an intruding government. Hence, 'dichotomy' may be the word that best defines Tehran. The concept manifests itself in every aspect of the life of the residents of Tehran. While Iranian rappers, death metal rockers and punks hold concerts in private houses in which dozens, and even hundreds, of people take part, as soon as they release an album or as Kaveh Golestan's son Mehrak (aka Reveal) writes, they can be called in for questioning for 'propagating decadence and tarnishing the image of the holy regime of the Islamic Republic'. While many in positions of power prefer to keep their blinkers on and not to see the state of Tehran's youth, some officials of the Islamic Republic understand that the paradox between the public and private spaces threaten the survival of the young republic. In her revealing essay, Danish anthropologist Janne Bjerre Christensen, who spent many months observing drug addicts in rehabilitation clinics in Tehran, writes that while the capital of the Islamic Republic has the highest number of heroin addicts in the world, it also has the first needle exchange centres in the Middle East. The religious establishment is torn between regarding addicts as patients or criminals.

Despite the constraints, photojournalists like Newsha Tavakolian, who won *National Geographic's* award for Best Young Photographer of 2006, Abbas Kowsari, Omid Salehi, Kian Amani, among others, continue to produce in-depth social documentary about women, clerics and the young. They capture the ideas, lifestyles and aspirations in homes, art and sound studios, police academies, the seminaries, on the street, and many other places across Iran. In *Transit Tehran,* Tehran is reported on, and photographed by, people who live and work there. It is a view from the ground up.

History of Tehran

What lies beneath

Most large cities in the East have long histories filled with wars, bloodshed and massacres. And this is how they left their mark on world history and gained lasting renown. Tehran, which was chosen as Iran's capital only 220 years ago, is one of the exceptions. The city has been the seat of two revolutions, two coups, two changes of dynasty, the coronation of eight kings and the swearing-in of six presidents, but it has no history of massacres and big wars. Once, the world's superpowers, Britain and Russia, bombed it for a few hours, without killing anyone. It was also twice the target of missiles and bombardments on the orders of Saddam Hussein.

But despite the fact that Tehran's history contains no record of wars and massacres, one period illustrates that, during the thousand years of continuous habitation, people have not enjoyed tranquil lives.

Buried History In central Tehran, there is a street named Manuchehri after a great Iranian poet. For many years now, it has been the main venue for the city's antiquarians. Among the most sought after antiques on this street are old documents known as treasure-deeds, each of which contains a series of crooked, mysterious lines and markings — often with a tree and a mountain drawn somewhere in the middle — ostensibly pointing the way to buried treasure. These treasure-deeds can, on occasion, fetch up to $500,000 (£250,000), even though, after paying this sum, the purchaser has to seek out specialists who can decipher the markings. Next, they need to buy a metal detector. This is complicated by the fact that there is a ban on the import of metal detectors in Iran, but it is possible to obtain them on the black market. With the treasure-deed, a deciphering specialist, a metal detector and a bunch of people ready to dig in the dark of night, the purchaser's chance of success is about 20 percent. They would need to search about 1,000 hectares of land around Tehran in order to uncover an antique artefact, hidden underground centuries earlier.

By using this system and smuggling out the buried artefacts — word has it — the international antiquities market has been filled with Persian artefacts over the past thirty years; artefacts that have been sold either by smugglers or by Iranian collectors who managed to move their possessions abroad after the Revolution. The government has recently been able to repatriate a number of important archaeological finds.

Some of these have shed light on the history of Tehran, a city, which, as late as twenty years ago, was thought to be only 400 years old. An examination of these accidental discoveries has revealed that the city, which now stretches from the foothills of the Alborz mountains to the salty desert of Qom, dates back hundreds of years and that it was, for example, a hub of life, trade, agriculture and animal husbandry six centuries ago at the time of the Mongol invasion of Iran.

In most parts of Tehran and its environs, to the south, north and west, labourers who lay the foundations for apartment blocks are accustomed to finding vases and, at times, coins and other traces of the city's past inhabitants. All of these belonged to the wealthy of those times, who, without the convenience of banks and safety deposit boxes, had no option but to hide their assets underground.

Fifteen years ago, when a bulldozer was flattening the ground for a new public park in the Qeytarieh District in north Tehran — past the summer gardens of the British and Russian embassies — it hit a rock and subsequently uncovered a treasure trove, which extended the history of Tehran by 400 more years. Up to then, it had been assumed that Tehran was founded during the reign of Shah Tahmasb I, of the Safavid dynasty, in the sixteenth century.

There have been two incidents of this kind over the past fifteen years. Once, when municipality workers were busy preparing the ground for another park on Abbas-Abad Hill, which previously belonged to the military for about eighty years. Another was when a construction worker, laying the foundations for a new building, dug up the floor of a house, which belonged to a military commander in one of the streets off Pasdaran Avenue in north Tehran. On the basis of these discoveries, when the Mongols reached the centre of the country in the thirteenth century and destroyed the important city of Rey, Tehran already existed as a cool summering place and mountain hideout. When the fleeing inhabitants of Rey stumbled upon it, it was about 106 hectares in size.

The presence of the Alborz mountain range to the north and the steep descent to the flat fields to the south and west appealed to a Safavid king during the course of a royal journey in the sixteenth century. He commanded that a moat be dug around the city and that a number of fortifications be constructed. Subsequent kings each added something to it and, by and by, notables and royal cohorts became increasingly interested in reigning from there. But the main development occurred in 1782, when Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, who founded a new dynasty, chose Tehran as his capital.

Previously, a number of Iranian cities had served as capitals of various dynasties, including Hamadan (Ekbatan), Shush, Esfahan (Isfahan), Shiraz and Tabriz. But Tehran became the capital just as the world was about to enter the nineteenth century, with its revolutionary developments, and as Europeans were increasingly making their way to the East.

Earliest Traces The first time Tehran appears in a document relates to a Shi'i cleric whose name included 'Tehrani-Razi' over a 1,100-odd years ago. There is also a book, written a thousand years ago, which praised Tehran's orchards and fruits, especially its pomegranates. Another attribute of the area mentioned in books were underground burrows and warrens, which, it is said, served as natural impediments to enemy attacks. This is why some sources refer to Tehran as a den of thieves and others have described it as a place where people stashed stolen goods.

There is no mention of Tehran for another 500 years. During this period, Tehran was an adjunct of Rey and anyone who became the governor of Rey was the master of Tehran. Although it is not very clear why — maybe because of its pleasant climate — some famous clerics, scholars and experts in Islamic jurisprudence, *faqihs*, took up residence in Tehran. Some of their burial places, which survive to this day, served as an attraction, drawing those who wished to pay their respects, for example, at the shrine of Shah Abdol-Azim. Hamzeh, the forebearer of the Safavid dynasty, was also laid to rest in this region and when his descendants became kings and used to visit his shrine, Shah Tahmasb finally issued an order in the 1500s, for new structures and towers to be built in Tehran which should number exactly 114, the number of chapters in the Quran. After Tabriz, where Shah Esma'il, the Safavid king, laid the foundations of a national administration, in the modern sense of the word, and declared Shi'ism to be the official religion of Iran, Tehran has been Iran's most Shi'i city. Even during the time when most Iranians were Sunnis, Tehran was home to many Shi'i *faqihs*. So, it is no surprise that today's Shi'i clerics, who have taken the helm of power, have chosen Tehran as their capital city. Nonetheless, there is talk, from time to time, that the administration intends to make Esfahan the capital of the Islamic Republic; a city which served as capital during the reign of the Safavids — who were Shi'is — that has many beautiful mosques, making it, as some claim, the Islamic world's biggest and most beautiful city after Damascus.

Travelogues Many foreign travellers and ambassadors have mentioned a mountain settlement with big orchards and succulent fruits in their travelogues. For example Clavijo, sent by Henry III, king of Spain, to serve as ambassador in the court of Tamerlane, passed through Rey and wrote in his diary, on Sunday, 6 July 1404: 'Tehran is a vast area, not bound by any walls, which is green and lush, with all that is required for comfort. But it is said that it has an unwholesome climate and is very hot in the summers...'

Two hundred years later, Pietro della Valle, the renowned Italian traveller of the period during the reign of the Safavid dynasty's Shah Abbas, passed through Tehran and described it as larger 'than Kashan, but with fewer inhabitants. It has many trees, and plane trees have been planted on all its streets with trunks so big that if four people clasp their hands together they will scarcely be able to form a ring around it. Just as Istanbul is known for its cypresses, Tehran is remarkable for its plane trees.'

However in 1806, Ernest Joubert, Napoleon Bonaparte's envoy, arrived in Tehran twenty-four years into its life as the country's capital and bemoaned the fact there was 'no sign here of Esfahan's good buildings, towers and fortifications'. He also mentioned that which remains a dream for Tehranis until today: 'Fath-Ali Shah, the second king of the Qajar dynasty, intends to make a river flow through Tehran.'

Iranian statesmen who had chosen the city as their capital because it was easy to defend recognised its greatest drawback — the lack of its own waterway. When Fath-Ali Shah first thought to rectify the situation, Tehran had a population of 30,000. Today it has a population of fourteen million and swallows up all the water from the rivers in the surrounding areas as well as the bulk of the country's oil revenues. But Tehran does boast a natural feature that its inhabitants are proud of and one that tourists never forget: the cone-shaped Mount Damavand, which stands majestically to the northeast of Tehran and, air pollution permitting, is visible from the city. The great twentieth-century Iranian poet Malek-ol-Sho'ara Bahar likened the dormant volcano to a white belted, silver-helmeted monster. In the same poem, he continued: 'You're the clenched fist of the times/raised to the skies at injustice.'

Fifty years after Malek-ol-Sho'ara Bahar wrote his ode to Damavand, hundreds of thousands of Tehranis raised their clenched fists to reject a monarchy's injustice and seek refuge in religion. This is how it came about that the twentieth century's last classical revolution occurred in Tehran, leading to the formation of an Islamic state which styled itself the vice-regent of God and was thought to have been established to bring the protestors justice. Thirty years later, journalists, lawyers, university students and women gather together whenever they can, clench their fists and raise their plaints to the skies. This has happened twice in the twentieth century: once in 1905, when the Iranian people demanded laws and law courts and won a constitution and, the second time, in 1979, when they demanded freedom and independence. Today the people demand democracy. All three instances, the details of what these clenched fists want are scribbled on walls in the back streets and alleyways, away from the eyes of the state's agents; even today, when nearly two million Iranians have access to the Internet in Tehran.

The People Like all big cities, Tehran is not what it is by virtue of palaces, buildings and high rises, but because of the people living there. Over the past fifty years, a number of important events have occurred, which completely changed the capital's demography, turning it from a city inhabited by courtiers and the well-heeled into one of labourers and the poor.

The city's first official census took place in 1866, during the reign of Nassereddin Shah Qajar. It was decided, with the assistance of a Frenchman, that key information would be recorded, including a map delineating its borders. The census showed that Tehran had a population of 150,000, including merchants from Esfahan and Azerbaijan who were making a living in the capital. Also according to the 1866 census, the city's inhabitants included 2,000 Qajar princes and princesses (linked to the reigning dynasty), 40,000 Tehranis, 10,000 Esfahanis and 8,000 Azeris.

The next significant census took place in 1932, using more scientific methods. Tehran then had a population of 250,000, about 70 percent of which had been born locally. This was in the early years of Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, known as a period of modernism. In addition to German-constructed buildings and the infrastructure established during this period — including a railway around southern Tehran that, for the first time, linked the capital to all the country's different regions — the appearance of Tehran's inhabitants also changed. They started wearing European-style clothes, sometimes by force of law.

Thirty years later, in 1964, another period of reform was launched, this time by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Reza Shah's son wanted to implement a plan that, experts suggest, had been dictated to him by John F. Kennedy with the aim of forestalling a rural revolution and preventing Iran from becoming communist like its northern neighbour, the Soviet Union. The most important aspect of the reforms was the destruction of feudal landownership. As a result, a city with a population of 2.7 million in 1964, registered a population of 4.5 million ten years later.

The Revolution and the 1980–88 war with Iraq — and the three million displaced Iranians and foreign refugees — affected all social phenomena from the renaming of city streets in honour of fallen soldiers (instead of poets, flowers and traditional plants) to paralysing urban services.

By 1980, with the victory of the Islamists, Tehran's population had risen to more than five million. In 1996, it was almost seven million and, now, it is said to be more than fourteen million. This is the circumstance in which Tehran has gobbled up Rey, its ancient forebearer, and, having also digested Shemiran to the north, is starting to climb up the mountainsides.

Contemporary Milestones During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Tehran witnessed an event, which people had been taught to fear for centuries: the death of the king; not a natural one, but an assassination resulting from a bullet fired by someone who could no longer bear tyranny's injustice. Although the people paid their respects to Nassereddin Shah, their monarch for fifty years who was the first Iranian king to travel to Europe, speak French and create post and telegraph services, official maps, ministries and government offices, some of his subjects secretly held mourning services for his killer. During this time, the circulation of clandestine pamphlets increased and they revealed that the people of Tehran, no longer submissive and uninformed, were starting to harbour some demands.

Ten years later, during a movement calling for laws and law courts, in order to win the right to have a parliament, people staged a sit-in at the British legation in Tehran until their demands were met. This was the first time in Iran's history that change was brought about through peaceful action, demonstrations and strikes. And, so, in 1906, the people witnessed the signing of the newly drafted constitution by the king.

But, the following year, the son of the king who had given people laws ordered cannonballs fired at the country's first parliament and several proponents of freedom, including the first director of a free and independent newspaper, were hanged. But this same tyrannical Shah was defeated by people from the north and the south of the country who began marching to Tehran and, on the day when the proponents of freedom arrived in the city, he sought refuge in the Russian embassy in Tehran and was deposed.

About ten years later, when foreign forces were about to enter Tehran, Iran's first and last democratic king, who had ascended to the throne when he was still young, made up his mind to move the capital to Esfahan. And although a provisional government was formed in the west of the country, under the protection of Ottoman forces and Germany (allies in World War I), the capital never changed. In 1921, there was a military coup, backed by the British embassy, which marked the start of the curtailment of people's freedoms. Ultimately, five years later, the democratic Qajar king was removed from the throne and was succeeded by Reza Shah Pahlavi, who did not believe in democracy.

Over the course of Reza Shah's sixteen-year reign, which ended when Russian and British forces entered Tehran in World War II, the country took big strides towards modernism to the point where policemen forced women to remove their *chadors*, so they became like European women, and clerics were banned from walking in the streets. Men, for their part, were obliged to wear European-style hats. Universities, railways, roads, the establishment of security in parts

of the country that had been lawless, and the creation of a single military force and the disbanding of feudal forces were among the most important things that were achieved during Reza Shah's military dictatorship. And, when several groups of students were sent to study in Europe, a new generation was formed for administering the country.

The people of Tehran had just about become accustomed to having one or two aircraft fly over their heads and land every week in an area west of Tehran, which served as an airport. In the autumn of 1941, Russian and British aircraft flew over the capital and terrified everyone by dropping a bomb on the edge of the city in the desert. Reza Shah's army, which he thought was the most powerful in the world, collapsed in a few hours. As the Allies' troops began to march into Tehran, in order to avoid being placed under guard, the dictator abdicated in favour of his son and was sent, by the British, into exile to South Africa. Afterwards, lost freedoms returned: newspapers were allowed to publish unimpeded, political parties vied for the people's favour, and governments were chosen via free elections. Tehran's main streets and the country's then only university, which had been built in the centre of the city, were the focal point of change. This period, which was Tehran's most lively in political terms, reached its peak with the nationalisation of Iran's oil industry. When the movement's leader, Dr Mohammad Mossadegh, became prime minister, Iran's oil — it was declared — belonged to Iranians and the world's eyes — and especially those of the Middle East — turned towards Tehran. In Tehran itself, Mossadegh, an elderly man who was often unwell and bed-ridden, became the symbol of the East's awakening. He deprived the British of Iranian oil and even the approach of a British warship did not frighten him.

But on 18 August 1953, a military coup, planned by the CIA and British intelligence, once again brought a dictator to power and Dr Mossadegh was detained and put on trial. Martial law was declared in Tehran, marking the start of twenty-five years of dictatorship by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Over this period, the country became very dependent on its oil revenues. At the same time, as oil revenues increased, Tehran shed its skin, grew bigger, became permanently afflicted with inflation and high prices, and a very rich class began to emerge before the eyes of migrant labourers and villagers. Finally, in 1979, these same labourers and villagers rose up and there was a revolution that did away with monarchical rule. The leader of the Revolution was a cleric who declared the country an Islamic Republic.

Three Events Among all the events that occurred in Iran in the twentieth century, three completely transformed the destiny of Tehran and its people. First, the economic and social reforms carried out by the last Shah in the 1960s, as a result of which half a million people who lived in rural areas ended up in shanty towns and slums on the peripheries of Tehran. Although they worked in the big city, they had no access to its facilities and resources and were unable to cope with the rampant inflation. Some analysts believe that, in the 1970s, this population turned into the engine of the Islamic Revolution — which was the second momentous event — and, on the orders of inexperienced revolutionary leaders, millions of people streamed into the city from rural areas and suddenly Tehran's demography and size changed. The third momentous event was the eight-year war with Iraq that displaced the population of warstricken areas and made them head for Tehran.

The Revolution and the war that followed led to a flooding in of rural people and, in less than fifteen years, Tehran grew in a cancerous, disproportional way. The city's population increased from about four million to more than fourteen million. This sudden rise and the arrival of the migrants (which included about half a million Afghans and 300,000 Iraqis) brought new cultural influences to the city. So, Tehran became the standard-bearer of a revolution, with its millions-strong rallies and marches in which those same slum-dwellers and people from the poor, southern areas of the city participated in large numbers. And if any cries were heard from the residents in the better-off north of the city, they, too, were in defence of those same poor masses and in protest of the problems and injustices that were taking place in Tehran.

Tehran's reward for playing a key role in the victory of the Revolution was that a handful of people could do whatever they wanted and a generation of young people came to power. Billions of petrol dollars and the support of the state and the people allowed them to dismantle the previous administration on the pretext that it was attached to the Shah and the West, despite the fact there was nothing to replace it.

All the country's poor were invited to Tehran to become house owners. Tin shanties sprang up everywhere, and they were officially declared to be townships. Fifteen years after the Revolution, Tehran had ten townships by the name of Taleghani, a popular, revolutionary cleric; six townships named after the Hidden Imam; six townships named after another popular ayatollah, Mottahari; six townships named Revolution; and four townships named al-Quds (Jerusalem). The slums even spread into the city's prosperous districts and, sitting cheek-by-jowl with high rises built by French and American architects and the luxurious villas of north Tehran, they became ugly displays of discrimination and poverty.

After the eight-year war, a Tehran which, before the Revolution, used to be likened to Cairo and Paris for its nightlife, turned inward, lacked identity and began expanding on all sides without any control or supervision.

The only thing that prevented the collapse of an overextended, characterless Tehran was the ever-rising oil revenue, which, once it entered the state's coffers, was mostly poured into the capital. Of course, this re-doubled the motivation of the inhabitants of Iran's villages and small towns to head for an overpriced Tehran, which was already short of housing, streets and leisure facilities.

The rationing of basic goods and the lack of supervisory systems during the war led to the emergence of middle men and wheeler-dealers, and provided a source of income for Tehran's rural migrants. At the same time, as the war and the culture of combat spread, the pre-Revolution social and urban systems were increasingly rejected and many manifestations of urban life were discarded on the pretext that they were Western. Tehran turned into a city that rejected its old identity without having developed social structures to create a new one. So, it became characterless. This was exactly at a time when Istanbul and Dubai and many other big cities in the region were rapidly modernising. Meanwhile a weary and subdued Tehran opened its arms wide to hundreds of thousands of displaced village-dwellers, and became home to masses of people, most of whom were only acquainted with life in dry and difficult climes and with farming and livestock breeding. Not only did these people find it hard and strange to accept urban rules and regulations, Tehran itself was in no fit state to encourage them to adjust their ways to life in a metropolis.

Symbolic Architecture Today Tehran is a city without a beginning or an end. Apart from the north, where it is bound by mountains, travellers would be hard pressed to say where the city's boundaries lie and at what point they've crossed them. But, once upon a time, Tehran, too, like most cities in the past, had towers and fortifications. In the first map drawn of the capital city, Tehran appeared as an eight-sided figure, with sides of unequal length. Around it was a moat, separating it from adjacent land. The only way to leave or enter the city was via the thirteen gates situated around it. There were three gates in each of the four directions of the compass, and most of the gate names were related to city geography and a district's social structure. When Reza Shah began modernising the country, he destroyed all the manifestations of the Qajar period because of his hatred of the dynasty that preceded him. Among the structures destroyed were twelve of these gates, which resembled the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Even a seat of government — if it had been based on European models, like a town hall or an opera house — was destroyed and only one of the gates, leading to land belonging to the military, was in use for years. In their place, foreign contractors built numerous buildings, and the city became dotted with squares containing statues of the new king and his children. Tehran also acquired a boulevard, which was built on the same principles as the Champs Elysées but was one-third its size.

Finally, in 1970, the capital acquired an emblem. In the middle of a big roundabout, which is said to be the biggest in the Middle East, located in west Tehran en route to the international airport, a monument was built, over an area of 15,000 m^2, which was named in honour of the Shah. The winning competition design was by a twenty-four-year-old University of Tehran architect graduate.

On the day the monument was inaugurated, the country's last king and queen were present. With great pride, they unveiled a replica of the charter of Cyrus the Great, the world's first ever charter of human rights. This historic artefact was inscribed on stone about 2,550 years ago and currently resides in the British Museum.

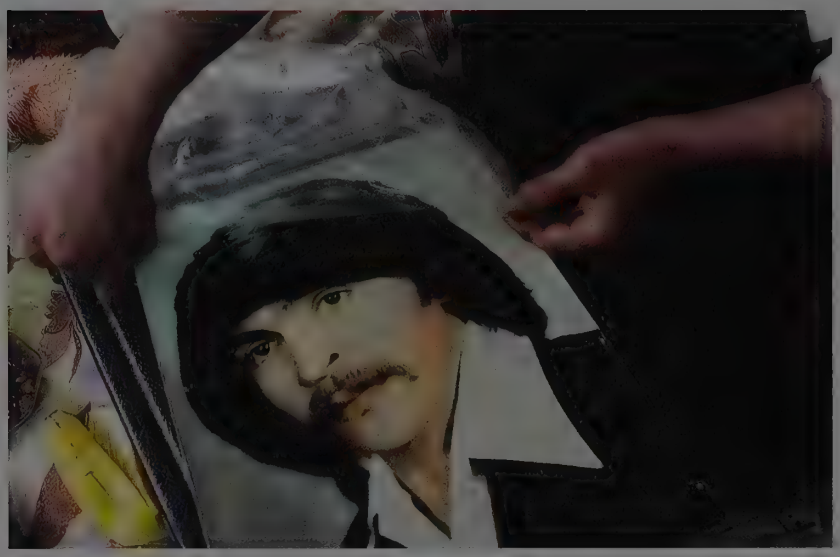
Nine years later, the Tehran monument, a constant presence in the world's media during Iran's Revolution against the monarchy, was renamed Freedom Tower. It was not damaged during the aerial bombardment of the city during the war with Iraq and annual revolutionary celebrations are held around it. However nearly thirty years after the Revolution, it has become clear that the monument has been badly affected by damp and that, if not repaired soon, it will collapse.

So, has the symbol of Tehran become symbolic of the developments in the city itself? For some time now, experts have been predicting that Tehran will experience a terrible earthquake. In view of the poor building standards, the absence of sewerage and the existence of narrow streets, which make relief operations almost impossible, countless warnings have been issued. These problems are compounded by tentacle-like gas pipelines beneath the city and the tunnels of Tehran's first metro; exactly the location where the hunters of the mysterious codes in the treasure-deeds dig today. Fourteen million people live on top of treasure — despite predictions that Tehran's earthquake will prove to be history's most devastating natural disaster, more destructive than Pompeii and the great flood.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

Photo essay and text **Newsha Tavakolian**

In the 1980s Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* making sex change operations available for transsexuals like Maria, who shows here a photo from her former life as Ashgar, ■ married truck driver with three children.



Girl Power

How the other half lives

For the last three years I have been working on these photographs because I wanted to show the lives of Iranian women beyond the slogans. As an Iranian woman myself, this subject is personal. In a way I'm taking pictures of my own life. In Iran, our lives are paradoxical. Outside we have to obey the rules of the Islamic Republic; inside we have to deal with social traditions and old ways.

Over 65 percent of Iranian students are now female. Many people are surprised by this statistic but after the Islamic Revolution many more young women sought higher education in the country. This is one of the many contradictions of life here. The new generation is completely different from that of their mothers who just ran households. Nowadays Iranian women are lawyers, doctors and engineers. In the globalised world we live in, Iran may look to some as if it has stayed behind, but social taboos have been broken.

Still, Iranian women face many problems. In divorce, they have fewer rights; their blood money is not as much as men's; and fathers have more rights than mothers over their children. This will not change without struggle. In the process we laugh, we cry and we go on.

Maria's story was featured in Zohreh Shayesteh's documentary *Inside Out*, which also included a cleric talking about the physical and mental anguish of a male or female soul trapped in the wrong body. The Islamic government, which executes homosexuals, considers transexuality a curable disease. Maria was forty-five when she had her operation. Now she is divorced and lives alone.

A notorious gossip magazine published a lurid exposé on Maria's life.

Except for Thailand, Iran is the country with the highest number of sex change operations in the world. Transsexuals, often rejected by their families, end up unemployed or working as prostitutes. Maria waits in a coffee shop.

Exercising and socialising take place at Revolution Sports Club.

When Iranian girls turn nine, they celebrate their coming of age in a festivity organised at school known as the *Jashne Taklif*. Romina and her classmates are excited. For the first time they prayed in an official *chador*, which covers everything but the face. Afterwards, wings were attached to their shoulders and they were called 'angels', since they are now Muslim women who must pray, wear a headscarf and refrain from shaking hands with men.

People relax in a Tehran café before a ban on smoking comes into force.

In four days, Zainab will get married. She waits in the beauty salon for a female family member to check her makeup and dress. On her wedding day, she will wear a covering over her bridal gown, so people cannot see her body.

Couple in a restaurant in the mountains outside Tehran, where the social codes are a bit more relaxed.

Iranian schoolgirls, waving the Iranian flag, attend a gathering in support of Iran's nuclear programme at the tomb and shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran.

Two members of Iran's all-female Saipa football team take a break in a playing field in central Tehran. As nineteen-year-old Nilofaar Bassir checks her makeup in a compact mirror, her collegue, twenty-one-year-old Zenab Bourasi, entertains herself with a ball.

Northern Tehranis campaign for
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani during the
2005 presidential elections.

The view out of a bus window.

In Baharestan Square, a couple passes a display supporting Iran's nuclear programme during Military Week.

ما با ولایت زنده ایم
VELAYAT KEEP'S US ALIVE
بودم
تا
منتظرا
گر از
مهدی

Poor Popper

We had a good afternoon. I bought Yalda some chocolate, big and square, wrapped in silver paper. But later, when we started eating it, it went soft and the corners stuck to the paper. When I bought the chocolate, I pulled my zipper right up to my neck and felt rich. Without a doubt, chocolate is a good discovery. Yalda is, in fact, as unpredictable as a crime novel, so it's hard to tell what really makes her happy. How can you tell what's going on behind the curtain? Two weeks ago, I got her a hippopotamus made out of some kind of strong metal. Instead of eyes, it had deep holes. It was pretty strange by and large and I think it was meant to be placed on top of a TV set or something like that. But Yalda put it in her pocket. I don't think she would put that strange piece of metal on the TV set in her house. For the price of the hippopotamus, I could've given Yalda six big packets of chocolate and even bought half a packet of cigarettes for myself. You can guess that she doesn't like the hippopotamus. But how can you know something until it's been tested empirically?

But chocolate was definitely a good discovery. After the hippopotamus, it was a success. Yalda ate it with enthusiasm. It was so hard that she had to break off a piece for me with her teeth. I sucked on the big piece of chocolate, which had been moistened by her saliva, all the way. The only problem was Karl Popper, whose collected works in my shoulder bag weighed like a heap of scrap metal. I carried the heavy, dense mass all the way to her house in a taxi and all the way back in a bus. When I walk with it in the street, I feel like I have a steel mine dangling from my shoulder. *Objective Knowledge, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, The Open Society and Its Enemies, Conjectures and Refutations,* all in hardback editions: Popper's positivist philosophy, hard and impenetrable like steel. Last week we decided that I had to sell Popper for the sake of life's little pleasures. I saw the first pile of books as I was stepping off the bus, along with my precious shoulder bag. It was a blue stall behind the bus stop. The books were in greasy cardboard boxes and smelled of Russian cabbage rolls. The bookseller looked at Popper with eyes as green as grapes. The black-and-white photo of Popper on his resplendent sofa is the personification of human power. Popper is a household name in Iran, where he is known as a theoretician of liberal democracy. But the bookseller closed *Conjectures and Refutations* and helped me put the books back into my small bag. From the bus stop I headed towards Revolution Square with boundless optimism and heavy reserves of positivism. I'd come from the direction of Freedom Square, since it's always busier there than at the other end of Revolution, though I'm not really sure in what way the moving throngs of people can help Popper. But I thought it might be easier to try to sell Popper starting from the busy side of Freedom. It's clear, at any rate, that you can't be positive about anything until it's been tested empirically.

As usual, I was meeting Yalda in Laleh Park at half past four. I headed for the park along with my heavy shoulder bag, walking past the tall railings on the university's east side. That was exactly where I'd given Yalda the strange hippopotamus the week before. In fact, it was because of that amazing animal that I was being forced to sell poor Popper. I'd squandered my savings on a piece of metal in a momentary fit of madness. Although buying Popper's collected works hadn't exactly been rational either, since I haven't even had the chance to read half of his works so far, this man who continues to lean back on his sofa with boundless optimism. My affection was only aroused when I realised that no one loves poor Popper. With my heavy bag pulling down one shoulder, I showed

everyone the resolute and famous Popper on his sofa, moving from the busy side to the less busy side of Revolution, along this strange street where people seem to melt away as they move from Freedom to the other end, like wax men or chocolate girls.

I was offered the highest price for Popper on the third floor of an old building, a price that, according to my calculations, was the equivalent of the miniature hippopotamus's head along with part of its neck. Without a doubt Popper's works are thick and heavy, and taking them out and then squeezing them back into a small bag uses up a lot of energy — it's been proved empirically — plus there's the energy used in climbing up and down stairs and defending positivism, which I may not even believe in myself. But in this struggle, my body's defences were displaying a very effective response to replace the lost energy, and all the way from the busy end to the less busy end of Revolution, I kept repeating to myself: Poor Popper, poor Popper, poor Popper, poor Popper. Even when I saw Yalda in the park, I said: Poor Popper! Surprised, she asked me if I was talking about myself. I told her that Popper was the alias of one of my friends. Yalda asked if I had found a job. I said: Not yet. But then we talked about other things, and I tried to steer our talk towards the optimistic.

Yalda's eyes are big and dark, a pair of authentic Eastern eyes! Unlike her protruding lips, which seem to have been cut out of a magazine advert for makeup. I asked her: Do you still have the hippopotamus? She reached into her pocket and showed me the shiny hippopotamus with its smooth head. A sliver of her thin, pink dress sleeve showed from underneath her standard *chador* and I could picture her wearing just the dress in the comfort of her home. She was still holding the ugly hippopotamus between her fingers and, from time to time, she would pass it from this hand to that. Whenever she rolled it over in her hand, you could see the animal's big stomach with its deep belly button. Every time she did this I felt happy, because I saw that it was useful for this game, at least. Maybe Yalda realised this too, as she didn't put it back in her pocket again.

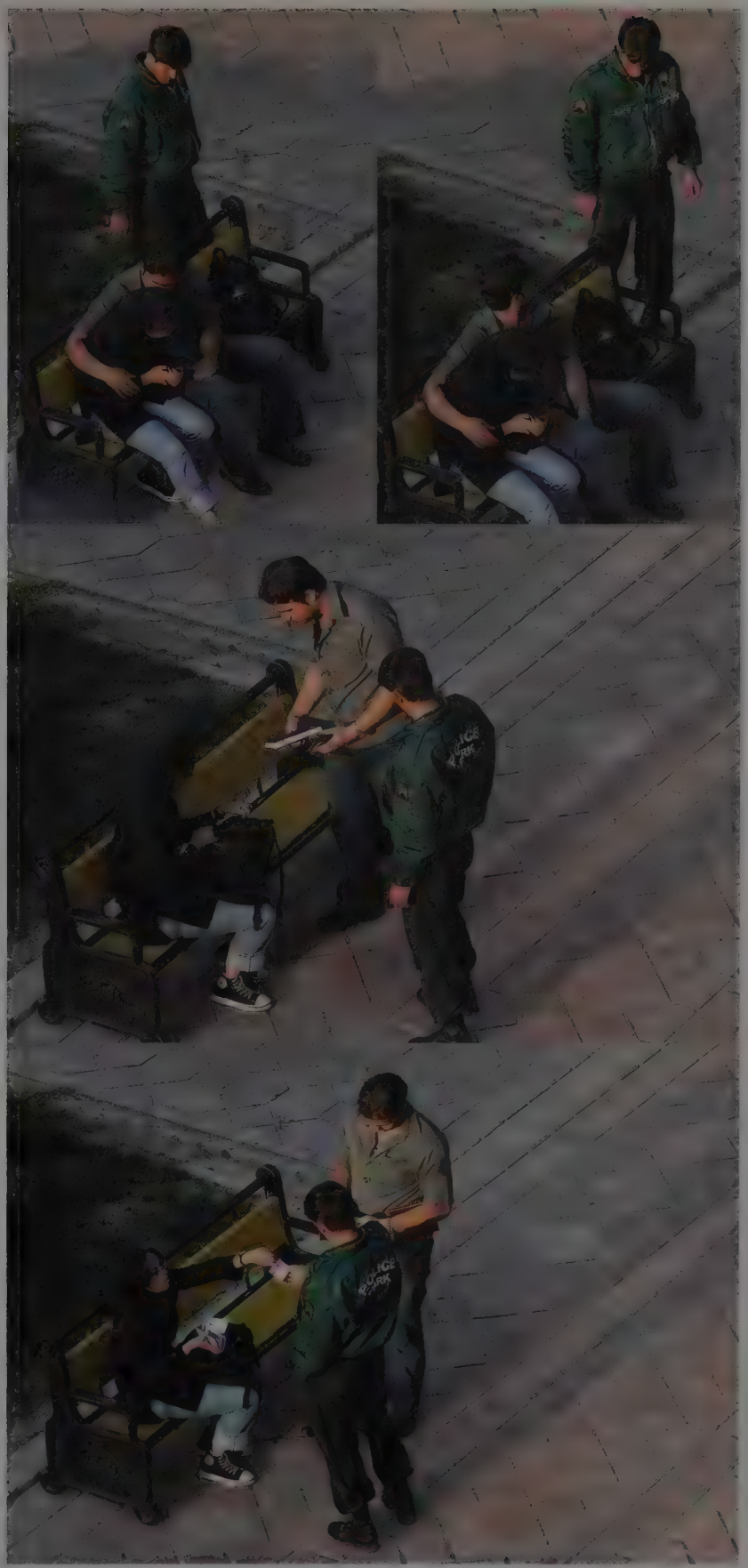
It can definitely be proved now that chocolate has been the best discovery, because it can easily be bitten into and you can spend quite some time sucking on the moisture from the lips of the other person who's bitten off the piece for you and chat about pleasurable things. With the discovery of chocolate this afternoon, I sincerely feel rich. But this isn't just because of the relatively low cost of the chocolate compared to the hippopotamus; I really do have a bit of money now. I've managed to sell a history of Iran. It's a full set, including social and political history, in a handsome gold-rimmed edition with light brown covers. Although I'm no longer a nationalist these days, I still liked the book's pictures, mainly of women from the Qajar era wearing short, pleated skirts and long white socks. Yalda's *chador* is so long that you can only see her shoes. Although women don't tend to dress like this these days, it seems to match Yalda's big, Eastern eyes.

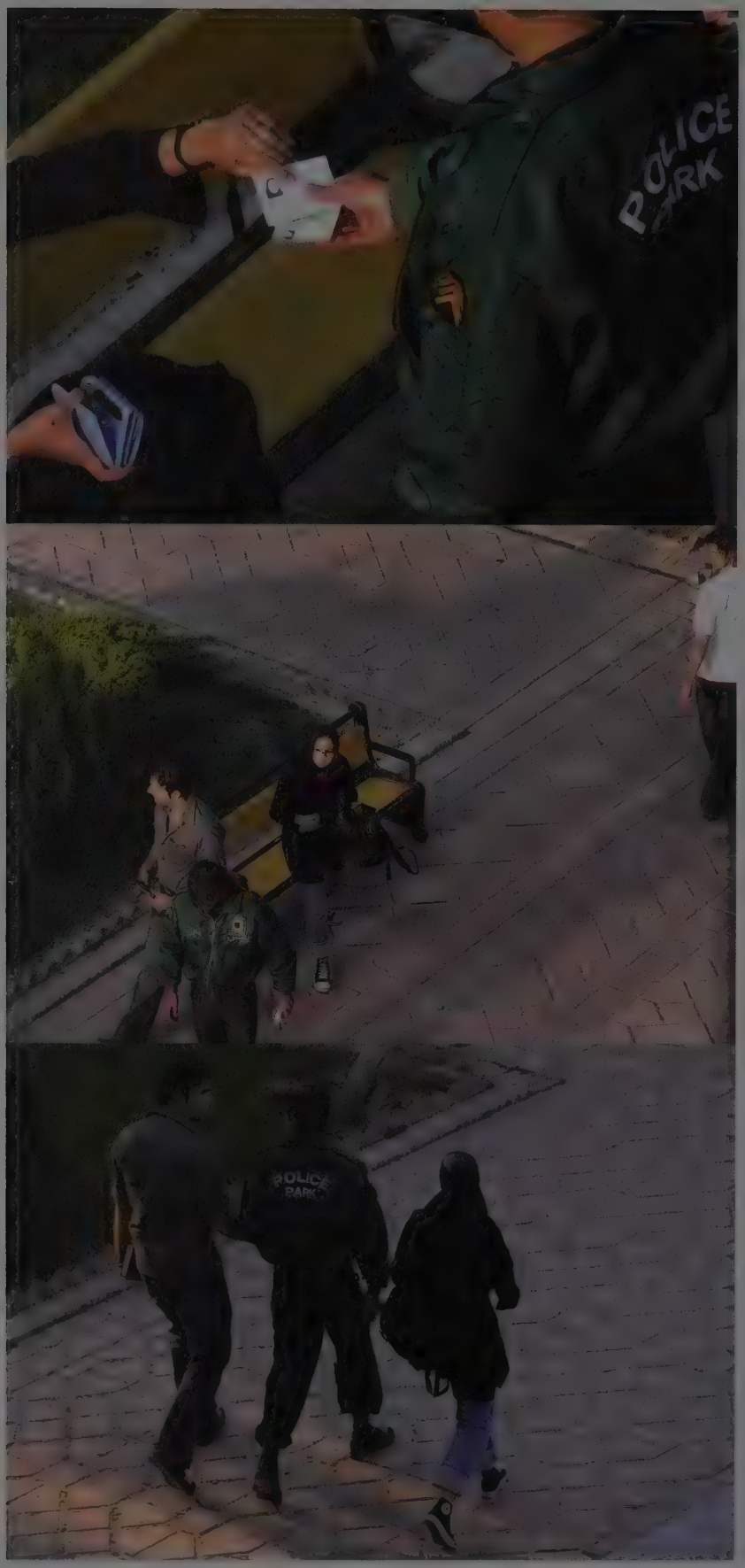
Chocolate is definitely a good discovery. They paid well for the history of Iran. An inner inspiration made me buy a packet of chocolate from the first supermarket I saw, and I felt rich. Now we can ride in a taxi together and, as we look at the indestructible mountains in the distance, slowly suck on the chocolate as it melts in our mouths. Chocolate is a good discovery. It's been proved empirically. The only problem is Karl Popper who, with boundless optimism about the world, is as heavy as a steel mine in my shoulder bag. Whichever way I shift the books, I can feel their unbearable weight. And that strange, strong piece of metal in the form of a hippopotamus lies at the bottom of Yalda's pocket. I imagine she might be rolling it around between her thin fingers. I was still rubbing my tongue against the chocolate in my mouth and helplessly murmuring: Poor Popper.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

The Best Years of Our Lives

A photographer watches a park bench for two years




POLICE
PARK

For the true believers of hip-hop, street cred is street cred, whether those streets be in central London or downtown LA.

Travels through the World of Persian Hip-Hop

East-in-West meets West-in-East

1 The lights are dimmed and the room is smoky. Bass-heavy music spews out of the sound system, thumping out a steady rhythm while scantily clad girls gyrate against young guys, the tips of their lit cigarettes hovering in the darkness like fireflies. The scene would not be out of place at a nightclub in London's West End on a Friday night.

All the regular characters seem to be in situ: the DJ skips through his record selection oblivious to all around him; the subtle looks of dissatisfaction at playing the wrong record and the triumphant gleams at playing the right one are his only communication with

the outside world. The veteran drinkers informally queue by the bar, waiting for their next whisky. A moaning mob of less-seasoned drinkers sits on the floor by the entrance to the toilet, waiting for the current occupant to finish flushing his ill-fated alcoholic misadventures down the drain so that they may do the same. The Ecstasy-heads writhe, twist and turn in time to the beat of the music in a futile attempt to pass off their spaced-out actions as dancing. The weed smokers are just as easy to spot. They tend to arrive in groups and then spend the entire night making not-so-subtle-as-they'd-like-to-think gestures to each other before disappearing from the party only to reappear twenty minutes later with glazed eyes and enthusiastic claims that they managed to think of a practical solution to rid the world of poverty, racism and disease, but forgot it as they came up the stairs. At the centre of the crowd are the hardcore, all-night dancers: the envied crown of 'most popular girl' already claimed by the pretty young blonde in the white dress. The less desirable crown of 'most seedy guy' has befallen the thirty-something Ponytail who feels it is his duty to inform everything in the room emitting female pheromones that he is single, has his own car (a Benz) and his own flat, where he is very lonely on nights such as this.

Like I said: at first glance, regular London nightclub antics. But something's not quite right. To begin with, the nightclub strongly resembles someone's front room, complete with furniture stacked to one side and cute family photos on the walls showing a chubby toddler playing by the sea. Also, the sound system is a laptop PC plugged into a home stereo, turned up to the max. The DJ isn't mixing records; he doesn't even have turntables. All he's doing is clicking and dragging MP3s on the laptop. While the bar consists of a table stacked high with paper cups and cans of whisky.

All of a sudden, the music is turned low by the host of the party, a teenage boy in a baseball cap in a pair of jeans at least three sizes too big for him. He waves away the protests of the crowd and gestures towards the open balcony with a grin on his face: 'Be quiet, or we won't be able to hear it — it should be coming now!' A few people in the crowd begin to chuckle. Others disapprovingly tell the party's host: 'Cut it out! You're being disrespectful.' The whining feedback of a speaker spluttering into life somewhere not too far away cuts off the talking. Everyone is all ears. Then a high-pitched male voice, singing in Arabic, soars through the air. The crowd begins to cheer, whistle and clap. Then the music is turned back up and the party continues. The singing was *Azan*, the first Islamic call to prayer of the day broadcast by local mosques at 5 AM.

This isn't a London nightclub. It's a house party in Iran. And we've kept it going straight through the night.

2 In my rap career, I go under the alias Reveal. Both my parents are Persian. I was born in Tehran, raised in London and regularly return to Iran. Around sixteen years of age, I started recording songs in studios and entering Rap Battle competitions in nightclubs where I claimed the title of UK Freestyle Champion for two consecutive years. My group, Poisonous Poets, has been signed to major record labels such as BMG/Arista and toured with popular US artists Busta Rhymes, Mobb Deep and De La Soul. We've also released our own LPs independently.

I've always rapped in English, but events in my life have made me look more closely at my own identity and cultural heritage, and just as I was playing with the idea of incorporating Persian themes into my music, I came across my first piece of Persian hip-hop, a song called *'Dastaa Balaa'* ('Put Your Hands Up') by the artist Deev, named after the mythical beast from the Shahnameh, the tenth-century epic poem of the kings by Ferdowsi. Although I had previously heard comedy raps in Farsi on the Internet before — little more than badly recorded parodies of hip-hop by groups with names like 'Persian Mafia' — *'Dastaa Balaa'* was different. It was a well-produced work of art, with good instrumentation, sharp and crisp recording levels, a catchy chorus and a rapper who used a multisyllabic rhyme structures as opposed to A-B-A-B.

But more than anything, the content of the song was amazing. Beginning with 'Ladies and gentlemen put your hands up/say "up yours" to the Akhonds, throw your middle finger up', it was an inflammatory attack on the Iranian government, accusing *mullahs* of pocketing public funds and blaming them for the widespread poverty and drug addiction plaguing Tehran's downtown districts. With its lyrical references to the *Shahnameh*, the song exhibited a strong sense of pride in being Persian.

Here was hip-hop: the original revolutionary music of the people, in its purest and most militant form, in a way reminiscent of early Public Enemy. And it was being performed in my mother tongue! I immediately went about trying to find out more, and eventually managed to get in touch with Deev via email. It turned out he was based in the US. At first I was slightly disappointed; while there was absolutely no doubt that if caught by the Iranian authorities he would be subject to severe consequences, the likelihood of this happening was much smaller because of his location. However, it was still an extremely bold statement, and the song rapidly spread across the Persian diaspora, clocking up to thousands of downloads a day. One blogger described it as 'the theme music for the next Iranian revolution'.

Through email conversations, Deev told me about other Persian rappers from all over the world, some who rapped in Farsi and/or in the language of their country of residence — Rafaj from Brazil, Imaan Faith

from Canada and Farinaz from Holland, among many others. Deev also initiated me into the at-times baffling Farsi Internet culture, which proved essential in my travels through the world of Persian hip-hop.

The Farsi language is the third most popular for weblogs worldwide, but because not all computers have the necessary software to display Farsi characters, Iranians also type in a form of phonetic Farsi where words are sounded out with the Latin script, which is informally referred to as 'Fingilisy' (Farsi and 'Engilisy' or English). Like English web users, they, too, have developed their own equivalent to Internet shorthand. In Farsi, the number thirty is pronounced 'Si' and many users type the word 'Merci' (modern Persian for 'thank you') as 'mer30', or '2khtar' instead of 'dokhtar' (girl) as two is pronounced as 'dough' in Farsi.

As any good book on the Persian language or native speaker will tell you, the written form of Farsi is different from the spoken one. Written, it tends to a more archaic expression that is not uncommon even in everyday letters passed between friends. Whereas the spoken has many colloquial variations that cannot be considered slang but are also not used in writing. The Persian web community differs in this respect, and weblogs and forum entries are written in the same way they are spoken. The use of bad language is also relatively uncommon given the utmost politeness of Persian society, where coarse language is seen as a sign of vulgarity. The only other place where profanity is so frequently heard in public is in football stadiums, where it is near-impossible to stop members of the crowd from taunting their opposing teams or the referee with coarse expletives that develop into crowd chants.

In the beginning, it was increasingly frustrating to follow artists making music in Iran: the download song links often expired, the websites were not regularly updated and contradictory information was habitually posted. Internal politics within the Persian rap community made it almost impossible to find a website not affiliated with certain rappers who had a beef against other rappers and resorted to sabotaging each other's websites. It was also disheartening because it seemed as though Persian rappers were trying to emulate their Western counterparts in both image and sound. Sites featured young teenage rappers with Westernised names like 'Perzian PimpZ' or 'Reza 3Pac' (as opposed to 2Pac). Many wore oversized basketball jerseys, American-style baseball caps and alarmingly fake-looking gold chains, trying their hardest to look like the latest 50 Cent video they'd seen on MTV. Their songs were nothing more than badly recorded mumbled sentences that occasionally rhymed, laid over the latest US rap instrumentals, the lyrics unconvincingly informing us of how tough they are. Then, thank God, I found Hich-Kas! His name literally means 'no-one'. It represents the humble position of one's self that is considered respectable in Persian society, although if translated into English it can also be read as 'number one' — a claim to the prime position. I had seen Hich-Kas mentioned in almost every forum, site or blog I visited. Sometimes he was the subject of recorded disses by other rappers; other times songs were dedicated to singing his praises. He was affiliated with a movement called 021 music — 021 being the area code for Tehran. Its website read like a directory of who's who in Persian rap.

'*Man Mastam*' ('I'm drunk') was the first Hich-Kas track I downloaded. Initially I mistakenly thought it was going to be an ode to alcohol, yet another attempt to imitate the West. Instead the track's title turned out to be a clever reference to Persian Sufi poetry, where alcohol and intoxication are metaphors for the divine joy felt by God's devotees. The song was very different from the pristine production and delivery of '*Dastaa Balaa*'. Hich-Kas is pure, unadulterated hardcore hip-hop raw. And the voice! He sounds like concrete would if it could speak.

Every one of my newly made Internet contacts claimed to know Hich-Kas, but no one could get hold of him. Returning to Tehran in 2003, I decided to email him one of my tracks as a way of introducing myself. I included my home telephone number and told him when I was going to be there. When he didn't reply, I didn't think that he would get in touch, but the day after I arrived, the phone rang. There was no mistaking the gravelly voice on the other end of the line. We spoke very briefly. He told me that he liked my track and was proud that a Persian was making quality rap music. He said he booked time to record a new song in the studio the following day and asked if I'd like to come along.

At the appointed time, I waited outside Mashad Leather Wear Store. My first impression of Hich-Kas, an unassuming young man roughly my own age, with short, cropped hair, moustache and goatee, in straight-cut jeans and a plain black T-shirt, was how well he blended in with the people on street. While he was friendly, there was something in the way he carried himself that let me know he would not hesitate to stand up for himself. He greeted me by shaking my hand and kissing my cheeks in the traditional Persian way and introduced himself as Soroush. In the taxi to the studio, he only showed a passing interest in the current affairs of US rappers. Soroush was more intrigued by my experiences as a Persian rapper in the UK, and was eager to show me his side of things.

The recording studio, which catered to classical and pop musicians, was a fully equipped sound facility, with all the prerequisites — uncomfortable tacky leather couches, piles of discarded junk-food boxes and long-haired recording engineers. Soroush said that only after much internal discussion did the engineers and studio

owners allow rap to be recorded in their studio. Aside from the legal implications, which were still unclear in 2003, hip-hop was considered more messing around than serious musical art form. Like other businesses in Iran, the recording studios are subject to random checks by the Islamic morality police, who listen through all the stored recordings in order to make sure that everything is in accordance with the government's Islamic guidelines. To avoid complications, studio engineers resorted to hiding the recorded rap vocals in the midst of hour-long classical compositions in the hope that those checking would only listen to the first few minutes of each file. At the studio, I met Salome, Iran's first female rapper, required by law to keep her head covered while she was in the recording booth. This really was hip-hop, Persian style!

Afterwards in a local open-air coffee shop, Hich-Kas and I became better acquainted over several cups of sweet fragrant tea and a lemon-and-mint-scented *ghelyun* (*shisha* pipe). Aside from mutual respect and liking each other's music, we got on well. Soroush was down-to-earth, modest about his achievements in Persian hip-hop. He reminded me of my friends, and he found my way of thinking familiar. He said that he and a few of his friends were also planning to visit Kish, an island in the south of Iran famed for its beautiful, coral reef beaches and 45-degree-plus tropical climate, and invited me to accompany them. We hardly knew each other, but I instantly accepted.

The story of what happened during those crazy eight days would probably see us publicly flogged by the morality police. Suffice to say, it was a holiday of epic proportions, one of those real Hollywood experiences that bonded the nine of us together for life in that clichéd teen-movie way.

3 Besides the obvious language barrier, there have always been cultural issues that have led to hip-hop being seen as strictly black music in Iran. The global success of white rapper Eminem made it acceptable for Persian youth to listen to rap without feeling excluded. A sign of what is currently popular amongst the youth of Tehran is the Internet usernames posted on forums. To this day Persian sites are full of 'Eminemdaddy234' or 'AliSlimShady'. While many young Iranians liked the anarchic element of hip-hop, there was still no Persian element in the music and, most importantly, the viewpoints of the rappers were almost exclusively Western.

Hich-Kas, who started rapping at sixteen, admitted to originally attempting to rap in English. But he quickly realised that hip-hop was about innovating as opposed to imitating. He had always had an interest in wordplay and lyricism, and began writing and recording rap songs in Farsi. His use of language is very articulate, and while slang is common in his lyrics, it is apparent that the beautifully intricate nature of his writing is certainly nothing short of poetry. However, the main challenge for him musically was to represent Iran and the elements of the culture his way — hip-hop by Persians for Persians.

The enormity of this task can only be understood against the backdrop of the Persian pop scene, comprised of mainly LA-based artists who follow a formula of mournful love songs over shoddily constructed instrumentations that sound like uptempo, pre-programmed Casio keyboard rhythms. This group of music producers, video directors, satellite channels, distributors and record labels has effectively formed a music mafia, with only a select few artists and labels dominating the entire market. Although these pop songs are painfully corny in every respect, their popularity is undeniable — go to any wedding, birthday or house party in Iran and you're guaranteed to hear them.

At home, he was also hampered by the absence of hip-hop producers in Iran. Via the Internet, he contacted various beatmakers who were at first reluctant to work with an unknown Persian rapper without being paid. His financial situation and the currency exchange rate did not make it viable, so he resorted to recording demos, sending them out and eventually establishing a network of foreign producers. But he still wasn't entirely satisfied with his attempts at making distinct and unique Persian hip-hop.

Another problem plaguing the rap scene in Tehran and hindering its development was the lack of live performance. In the early days Hich-Kas and others attempted to hold meetings and perform in public, but these either turned into street fights between rival groups from different housing complexes in Tehran, called *shahraks*, or were dispersed, sometimes forcefully, by the morality police. Effectively, songs on the Internet and mobile phones have replaced a live music scene that never was.

Hich-Kas also began rallying other rappers and like-minded hip-hop fans to loosely form the 021 collective — not an official group or crew but simply a means of identifying oneself as having Tehran origins. It was the Persian equivalent of US rappers claiming East or West coast — complete with its own hand sign. Reminiscent of the twisted-fingers 'Westside' hand sign made famous by Snoop Dogg and 2Pac, the thumb and forefinger curl to form a '0', the middle and ring finger separate from the little finger to represent the '2' and '1' respectively. There was even the emergence of a rival faction 051 from Mashad, though they later disbanded and their lead rapper Eblis ended up collaborating with 021.

Under the influence of Hich-Kas, many rappers with anglicised names switched to their native language, and thus Reza 3pac became Pishro. He also ghostwrote many of the early songs by other artists that were featured on the 021 music website, including the popular remix of 50 Cent's 'In tha Club' by artist 50 Toman (named after the Iranian currency). In one of his tracks, Hich-Kas refers to himself as the 'Godfather of Farsi Rap', which was no exaggeration. He had always been generous with advice and suggestions but some of the groups he helped later dissed him in their recordings.

During our time together in Kish, we began writing a song together for which we didn't yet have a title but agreed it had to set the precedent for a whole new direction in Persian hip-hop. When we returned to Tehran we integrated elements of classical Persian music into the instrumentals we rapped over, with the help of sitar player Iman Majedi and keyboard programmer Shahin Pajoom.

The verses were about Tehran and our experiences — Soroush speaking as someone raised there and me from the perspective of living abroad but returning home regularly. When we were recording the song, the vibe was so strong that we penned an extra third verse, which we rhymed back to back in the studio. The song was to become '*Tripee Maa*' ('Our Style') and with the help of the grainy low-budget, black-and-white video of street scenes, including people demonstrating the use of the *gammeh*, the long sabres commonly pulled out in street fights in downtown Tehran, gained notoriety on the Internet.

By the time I came back to Tehran in 2004, people were regularly recognising Hich-Kas in the street. Some hardcore fans in Tehran had even managed to find a copy of one of my Rap Battles in London on DVD! Although I was quite alarmed to find this rumour on Persian-hiphop.com forum: one fan claimed I was notorious in London for going to clubs and picking fights with black rappers, perhaps in some type of twisted attempt to prove the dominance of Persian rap... Iranians from all walks of life had seen the video, and long-lost relatives began to call our house, enquiring whether it was really me swinging the blades!

4 There is an increasing awareness of Persian hip-hop in the West, although it is still seen as a novelty — 'Look they don't just make bombs, they rap as well!' I have received a steady stream of letters and emails from academics, journalists and even political activists who have heard about the Tehran scene and want more information. But at times they seem more interested in its sociopolitical aspects and less about the music. In 2005, a group of three London-based Persian rappers — Saman Wilson, Sohrab MJ and Mehrad Hidden, who collectively went by the name Zedbazi — became popular with profanity-filled songs about taking drugs, chasing girls and getting drunk. While their topics are hardly original, in rhyming song structure they are ahead of the Tehran rappers, mainly because of their familiarity with English and rhyming patterns of American rappers. They represented the glossy side of hip-hop, with a Persian pop influence in some of their beats. Within a few months, their songs, which were numbered rather than named (Zedbazi I, Zedbazi II, etc), were played in Persian nightclubs around the globe. It was a sign that the scene was growing, although their popularity in Tehran is in part due to the fact that the moneyed Western lifestyle they portray in their lyrics is something Persian teenagers aspire to.

Class is a factor in the music because Tehran is a city of extreme inequitable divisions of wealth: the super-elite live in the leafy northern suburbs in large houses resembling castles surrounded by lush green gardens, while the poor live in cramped downtown areas plagued by crime and drug addiction; they inhabit shoddily constructed houses one step away from the mud structures of Iran's rural villages. The contrast between the two sides is shocking. Zedbazi makes music for the middle-class playboys of the north who spend their days driving around in their dads' cars chatting up girls by the side of the road. Hich-Kas, from a more modest background, is neither part of the super-rich northern Tehran inhabitants nor from the slums. My impression of the house where he lives is that his family has had to work hard to get where they are.

Interestingly, he has taken it upon himself to represent the poverty-stricken classes of downtown Tehran, which is noble, but simultaneously makes him a tragic figure. He may never be truly appreciated by those he represents. There is a long way to go in terms of resolving the tensions and hostilities between more traditional Iranians, such as the largely religious downtown slum districts, and hip-hop. Many traditionalists consider any form of Western influence, be it music, art or filmmaking, as detrimental to Persian culture. They are simply not prepared to accept that identity and heritage can be maintained and expressed through a modern medium.

In early 2007 Hitch-Kas released *Jangale Asfalt* ('Asphalt Jungle'), the first official Persian hip-hop LP, an eleven-track masterpiece exclusively produced by Mahdyar, a seventeen-year-old musical prodigy. The album combines heavy hip-hop basslines with delicate strums of sitar and the rolling rhythm of the *tombak* (goblet drum) and *daf* (frame drum) to exceptional effect. The content of the album covers topics such as class, the nuclear power issue, the metaphysical as well as everyday life.

Before films, books and music albums can be sold in Iran, they must be given a *mojavez*, an Islamic seal of approval. In true hip-hop fashion, Hich-Kas sidestepped the problem of the *mojavez* by simply not applying for one. Instead, he sells his music through downloads on the Internet, pressing his own CDs, complete with six-page booklet, and releasing them through his independent Saamet record label. Although the songs were heavily bootlegged online, sale projections are looking positive. He has also set up an Internet radio show, *Radio Divar*. Since the release of his album, Soroush has grown from being the underground king of Persian rap to becoming a recognisable face on mainstream Persian websites. Even the new video by teenybopper sensation Afshin features someone in a T-shirt with 021 and Hich-Kas's name misspelled across it.

And that's pretty much where my article was supposed to end. Or so I thought. I had finished my first draft, read through it with Soroush and was preparing to return to London and my studies. During one of the last days I was in Tehran, I was with Soroush when he received a phone call telling him that one of the younger rappers he had been working with had been arrested. This in itself was not unusual, teenagers can be arrested for the way they dress, their hairstyles or even for congregating in public places. What was unusual was that the police had arrested the young boy during a raid on one of the studios! The details were very unclear, the rapper was still being held at the police station and the full story would not emerge until he was released a few days later. In the meantime, I returned to London, but when I tried to call Soroush for an update I found that his phone was off, which was unusual. I was a bit concerned, and when I rang our mutual friends in Tehran, they confirmed my fears.

The authorities had started investigating Persian rap as part of a wider government morality clamp down. I was told that Soroush and two others were on the run. During the following week when I was regularly phoning back and forth for updates, I was told many things, some possible, others outright ludicrous — such as the rumour that Hich-Kas had been sentenced to execution due to the emergence of a sex tape, in which he starred, and had fled to Pakistan! Overnight, the phenomenon of Persian hip-hop went from an underground movement largely dismissed by the public to becoming the main topic of conversation. Reformist newspaper *Shargh* ran a story with a large photo of Zedbazi recording in a studio. It seemed that Persian rap had finally gained everyone's attention albeit through notoriety rather than success. The Internet became awash with rumours and some misguided artists in Iran began to falsely claim that they too had been arrested in order to boost their popularity. The self-destructive aspect of the Persian rap community manifested itself once again and certain artists who were rivals of Hich-Kas took the opportunity to cast doubts on the credibility of his problems. The result was a very muddled situation where everyone seemed to be indignant and righteous even though no one knew what was really going on.

When I finally spoke to Soroush, I managed to get to the truth. One of the studios where Persian rap was being recorded had become a hangout for the young. Complaints by the neighbouring residents alerted the authorities to the existence of the Persian hip-hop movement. At the same time, members of Iran's Musicians Union filed an official complaint against Hich-Kas's *Jangale Asfalt* CD because it was still being distributed without a *mojavez*. It was then that the authorities decided to compile a list of the most popular rappers.

After they raided the studio and arrested the young rapper, he was shown a list of names and was asked to verify their addresses during his interrogation. The authorities also tried to apprehend Soroush at the studio, but he had been warned by a friend and did not turn up. He went on the run for a few weeks but police cars regularly visited his family's home so he eventually handed himself in. He told me that the plainclothes officers who conducted his interview treated him very well. They said they were investigating the rap scene in Tehran. He was made to post bail before being released and told to await trial that would take place after other nameless suspects were apprehended. Interestingly, Hich-Kas was only arrested for charges relating to the unauthorised distribution of his CD, not the corruption of morality. Because he received reasonable treatment, it seemed to suggest that the officers understood the content of his songs. Hopefully his situation will resolve itself with a fine, although the future of rap recorded in Iran is now largely dependant on the outcome of the trial, which should also shed more light on the nature of the authorities' problems with the music.

My main fears lie with artists like Zedbazi who use profanity, sex and drug references in the lyrical content, which might merit harsh treatment by the police. For the time being, two members of the group who have returned to Iran have not encountered any problems, while a third member will go back soon. Meanwhile the whole Persian hip-hop scene has come to a nervous standstill in anticipation of the upcoming trial. Whatever the outcome, it is certain that this is the beginning of a new era for the music, whether it is for better or worse remains to be seen.

Mehr-a-king

Listen, man ride anything with a rhythm...
This is live from the capital life in the capital
where my bredders pull a knife to deprive you of capital
This is Reveal flowing live on the beat from Tehran
This is real, show u life on the streets of Tehran
This is 021, what u repping son?
Ain't from round here, u shoulda never come, in fact
u better runnnn!
Voice: (Yo, yo, yo Revs wha gwan blud? That's all live
but I don't understand what's all this 021 you're
talking about?)
Reveal: That's Tehran
Voice: (But I thought u was a London boy?)
Reveal: I am but just listen ye...

Verse 1

Tehran 1983 I'm born in a ward
on the same day that lives were lost, I was born in a war
At a young age I came to London
grew up in the inner city learnt to make my way
in the dungeon
I done functioned with gunmen in drug dens for days
but for us it's nothing much, it's just London babes
I started battling to keep away the rage
remained undefeated on beat, on street or on stage
in a rave
I'll say no names but I've slain some major rappers too
from the US to the UK u can check the facts it's true
Why u debating? I probably baited your favourite
rapper too
even had this you start crying, and that was loops
Anyway, back to what the topic of the track is
I made 'What Estate'[1] and when it dropped it was classic
I mean, it never sold like gold dust
But in every jail and estate in Britain it got shown that
'road' love
A lot of Persians at my shows showed up
Was still surprised when my cousin from back home
phoned up
Told me they making rap in Iran and my flows blown up
And I'll tell u the rest in part 2 bro, hold up...

Chorus

This is Reveal live, spitting real life
What u listen to when u missing that real vibe
Persians worldwide, keep it real live
Reppin' Iran till we die, know the deal right?
I'm repping LDN and 021
I'm third world and inner city mixed into one
Prince of Persia, all hail 'cos the king has come
Prince of Persia, spit to murder when I flick my tongue

Verse 2

In '03 my pops died, that was raw to the core
But I'm a soldier, I told u I was born in a war
And that ain't figure of speech, I mean it literally
Picture a jeep getting blown up in a minefield
in the Middle East
Now keeping thinking of the scene
Irrelevant as it seems, it ain't relevant to you
But it's relevant to me, they was relatives to me
So I rep them on the beat, RIP K.G., rest in peace
Had to readjust and get my head straight
Cut the bullshit out of my life and jettison all of
the dead weight
I came back to my motherland
Hooked up with my brother man
Hich-Kas, we recorded a summer jam
The first time Persian instruments were mixed with beats
We pioneered hip-hop in the Middle East
We started some gangsta shit like them Sicilians in Italy
Soon as we dropped the tune it instantly became history
We made a video and really ripped it, braah!
Had Persians all over the globe singing '*inne trippe maa*'
(this is our style)[2]
Latest news, there's a label too, Saamet
We making moves with some major dudes, name a few
Mahdyar is the producer's name
18 but makes beats to put producers to shame
So we got it locked far as I can see
Limit is the sky, we gonna take it far as the eye can see
(No second chorus, straight to Prince of Persia intro)

1 'What Estate' by Reveal was released on 12-inch by Sensory Overload Records, in 2005. 2 'Trippe Maa', never released on record, was recorded by Reveal and Hich-Kas in Tehran in 2004. It is the first Iranian rap song to be accompanied by a video, see 'Iranian Rap Hich-Kas Music Video' on the Video Zone of *www.zirzamin.se*

Prince of Persia

(Mic check one, yea yea, *sedaamo dary*? (can u hear me?)
POISONOUS! *Sefr bisto yek*! 021 to NW8,
double P inside, Poisonous, big up Mahdyar on
the beat, listen, lemme clear my throat...)

Verse 1

Prince of Persia, though I come from UK
And I don't really give a flying fuck what you say
I come to slew brays, u get cut with two blades
Better call the dentist, u bredders r too fake
Prince of Persia, my raps are that deep
Built my studio in *Takhte Jamshid*[3]
I pack the black heat for cats who act chief
BLAP! We run things like track athletes
Verbally hurdling, certainly murking them
Rap so fly, I get heard by the birds and 'em
Work with the words in my verse 'till I'm hurting them
Burning my herb 'till I'm slurring my words again
Vision straight blurred, room turning and circling
Murder the verse, I put words in the hearse again
Shoot at the grave till they turn in the earth again
We rep the worst of the worst of the worst of them
We war for turf like the Turks and the Kurds and 'em,
If u ain't heard of them, then u need to learn
my friend
Ignorant minds, yo I swear I wanna murder them
U better start splurt cos your term been
adjourned again
More raw shit, I bour[4] your click
From the wild west, where my bredders all draw quick
Me and drastick told u we run things mate
So please blud let's get one thing straight
Check the lyrical ability before u think of dissing me
I kill 'em on the riddim plus I bring it to
them physically
U couldn't get close cos u lack the agility
Fuck the army my crew roll paramilitary
U don't wanna come to Iran to see me
You might get kidnapped and beheaded on TV
I roam the streets of the Middle East freely
All I need is weed and a little tick beanie

Chorus

It's the official Prince of Persia, u know who this is...
The official Prince of Persia, and u know how we do,
The official Prince of Persia, u know who this is...
The official Prince of Persia, this is how we do it...
The official Prince of Persia, *hame mishnasan*
(everyone knows him)
The official Prince of Persia, *hame mishnasan*
The official Prince of Persia, *hame mishnasan*
The official Prince of Persia *bia bia bia*
(come on, come on, come on) REVEAL

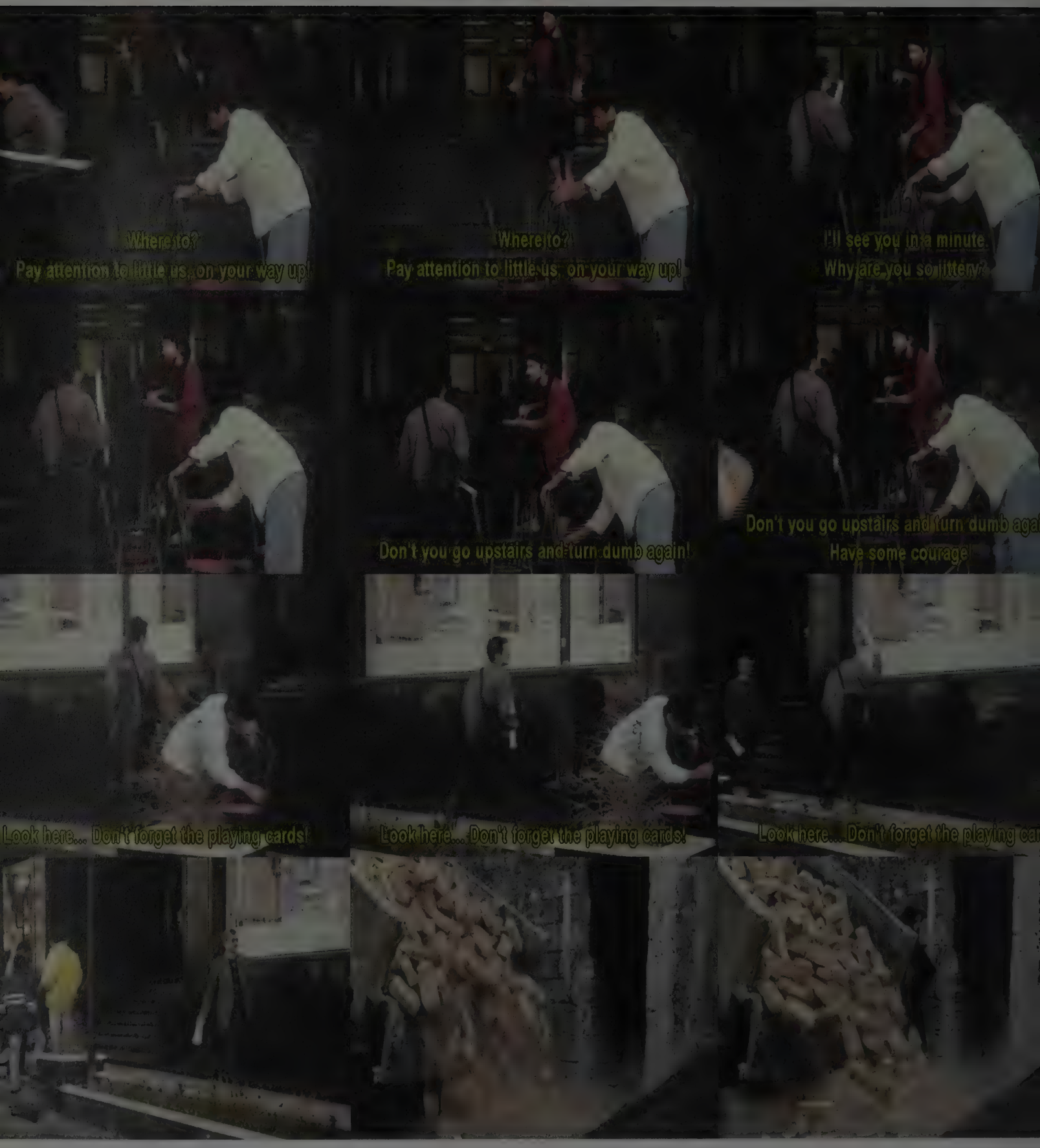
3 The ancient ruins of *Takhte Jamshid* are in Persepolis, in Shiraz.

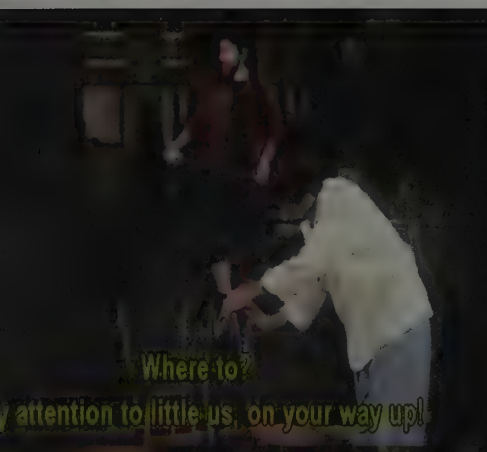
4 'Bour' is London street slang, which means to stab or cut though, for instance, a crowd.

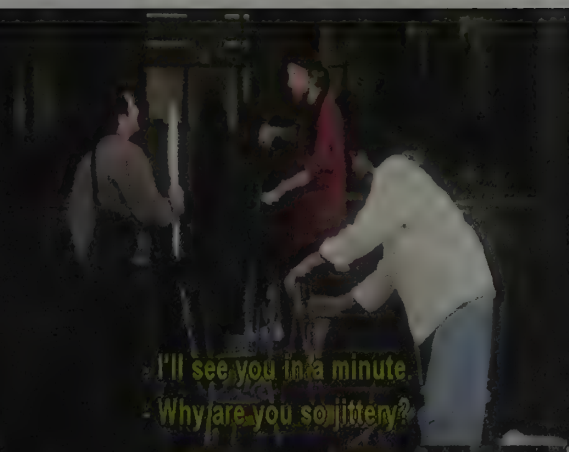
Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**

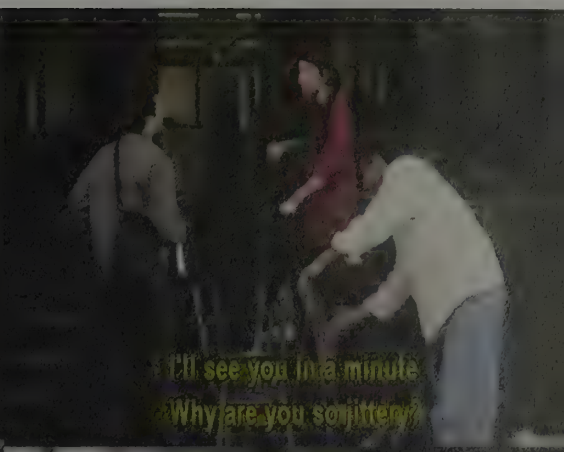
Masum, get ready, I'm coming.
Tuck your hair in!
Tuck your hair in!
- I love you so much!
- Don't be silly, now!
- I love you so much!
- Don't be silly, now!

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**




Where to?
attention to little us, on your way up!


I'll see you in a minute.
Why are you so jittery?

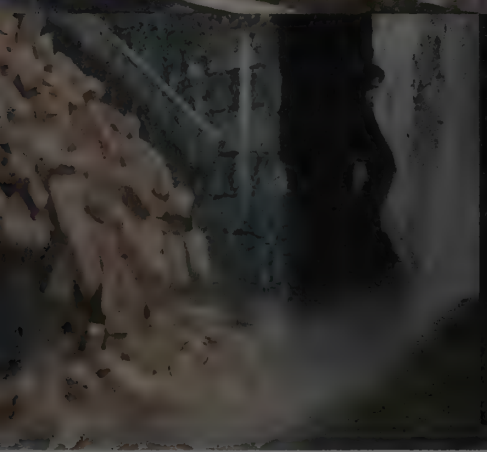

I'll see you in a minute.
Why are you so jittery?

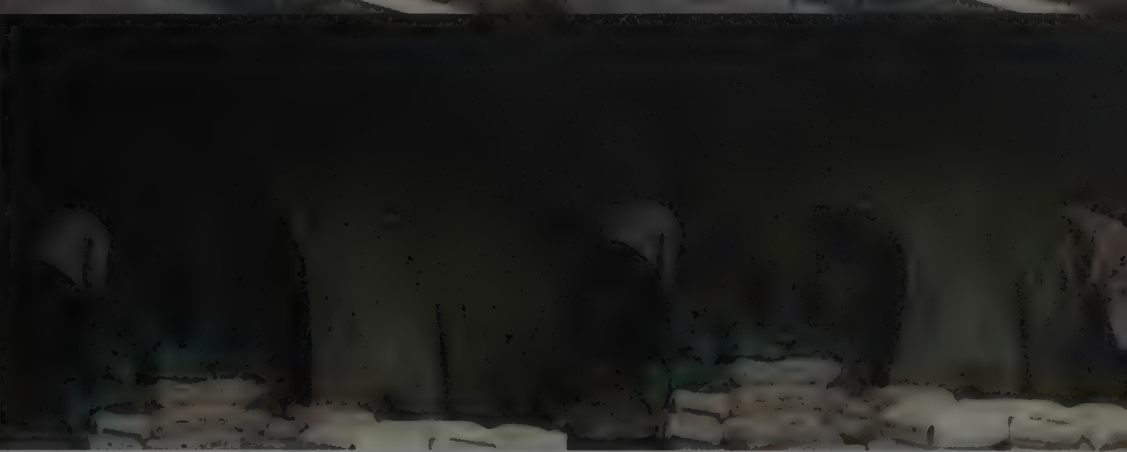
Come to the restaurant
and tell me about it tonight.

I have a delivery to make, to the port.

Look here... Don't forget the playing cards!

k here... Don't forget the playing cards!





I've asked myself again and again: is freedom a symbol? Is it a concept that everyone interprets in their own way, depending on the conditions in which they live? Or is freedom a tangible and measurable reality, visible and concrete in the world? I haven't yet come up with a clear answer. But I do know that a large portion of my life and the lives of my friends and colleagues, most of whom are journalists, artists or social activists, are spent trying to widen our restrictive circle of freedom, day after day after day, even by the slightest amount.

White Scarves

Freedom is a stadium; a symbol; a political act; a dream

No one knows the identity of the first woman who donned masculine garb, cut her hair and hid her femininity so she could go to Freedom Stadium like a man, lose herself in the raucous tumult of a 100,000-strong crowd and cheer her favourite football team, riding high on the crest of a Mexican wave. But I've heard it said repeatedly by sports journalists that time and again since the 1990s there have been girls prepared to take this extraordinary risk and worm their way into this exciting and occasionally perilous atmosphere.

There have been days when fans, upset by the result of an important match, have rioted in the streets. So many windows smashed, so many cars wrecked, so many walls pulled down. Sticks, stones and matches always seem ready to hand. There have been days when the two sides' fans have turned on each other and delivered thorough thrashings. There have been days crammed with firecrackers, with swearing and foul language, with Molotov cocktails; days on which I don't know — and there is no way of knowing — how the women who'd fled their femininity managed to escape the fray. Or did they?

There is no information about the exact date on which women first embarked on this business of disguising themselves as men, or the exact number of women involved so far, because they never have and never will publicise their identities. The stories of those that have been by chance revealed have spread by word of mouth.

But our story, that of the members of the 'campaign for the defence of women's right to enter sports venues', better known as the 'White Scarves', is another matter — although not unrelated to the story I've been telling you so far.

At an exploratory meeting held by a number of active women's groups and NGOs in 2004, the banning of women from some sports arenas was discussed as a violation of women's social and public rights. It was highlighted at the meeting that some girls were attending games in disguise. The meeting's participants, including some of Iran's best-known feminists, wrote a letter to the directors of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), protesting the ban and seeking FIFA's assistance. It was signed by more than 100 women and men. Maybe the letter encouraged some young women keen on football, including a number of journalists and bloggers, to set off for the 100,000-seat Freedom Stadium in the hopes of finding a way in. Little did they know that freedom demands a larger crowd and a higher price.

The match that day was an important 'friendly' between Iran and Germany. The Iranian national team was in the throes of the Asian qualifying matches leading up to the 2006 World Cup. A match against a strong European team would provide essential practice and could be a morale-booster for the Iranian team.

Fewer than fifteen girls headed for 'Freedom'. Holding the tickets they had purchased in advance, they formed a queue outside the stadium's west gate. But a small queue of that paltry number was no match for the resounding 'no' they heard from Freedom's gatekeepers. When the gate opened and buses carrying players drove through in front of them, they waved their white tickets over their heads in hope and expectation. The buses drove straight by.

Much to their surprise, the waiting girls realised that German women were passengers on one of the buses. This puzzled the small group, until one of the men said: 'The ban is on Iranian women. The German women have come all this way to cheer their team, and we can't stop them. Our regulations don't apply to them.'

Freedom, why should you be concerned about the colour of my skin, or my race, or my place of origin? Why should you be concerned about my gender? But this wasn't the song that was sung on that day in that place. Instead, another melody filled the air. The harsh voices of a bunch of men, who deemed the presence of a small group of women protestors to be inimical to the peace and security of the game, were shouting: 'Disperse!' This cry could be heard from every side. The criers were charged with maintaining peace and security at the stadium, and the feelings of the women — who'd gathered there with all their joy and enthusiasm to cheer their country's national team — were irrelevant.

The protestors stayed for a while in the hope that their patience might pay off in some way. But the patience of a handful of girls was meaningless as the shrieking batons cut through the air. This was how it came about that blonde German women made it to Freedom, and dark-haired Iranian women headed back home, so that our story would continue. The presence of a few social-affairs journalists helped turn the incident into news and it was carried by a number of papers, although on a very small scale. It also reverberated in cyberspace.

Of course, after Mohammad Khatami became President and carried out some government reforms, female sports journalists were able to sit in the special journalists' section of the stands to report on matches. But this wasn't our problem. We had a question about the situation as a whole, and the 'why' that it raised. Under circumstances in which there was no law banning women from sports stadiums, they were barred because some officials in the years after the Revolution had taken the view that it would be better if women didn't go to such places, as it would be difficult to ensure their safety. This male view, without ever having been turned into law, became a tradition now upheld by the might of the police and security forces.

Our question was this 'why'. Why couldn't women who were keen on football, even in love with it, be allowed into stadiums? We immediately realised that we had to increase our numbers. If there were more of us, we'd be stronger, which would mean that our voices would be better heard. We had to ask for help and publicise the situation. We had to ask the defenders of women's rights to support us not just by writing and signing letters, but by joining us. If women couldn't even obtain the least of their natural rights, how would it be possible for them to obtain the more important rights denied to them by law? This question brought women closer together. Telephone calls, text messages, emails and meetings increased our numbers to more than thirty.

We didn't have much hope in freedom. It was as though freedom had to place its hope in us. This relationship between freedom and us had to remain one-sided until further notice. We would run after it, and it would move further away. We would woo it, and it would play hard to get. We would display our affection, and it would spurn us and turn away.

Am I talking rubbish? Am I out of line? Am I insulting freedom? No! These are the words we must chant as we march onwards, at times intermingled with bitterness, at times with eagerness and at times with love.

On 8 June 2005, Iran and Bahrain faced a decisive match. The result would determine whether or not Iran would head to World Cup 2006. One day before the match, a group of women wrote to the governor of Tehran to say that it was their right as citizens and as inhabitants of the country's capital city to enter the stadium. The letter, signed by more than 100 feminists, read in part:

For some years now, Iranian women have been deprived—on the pretext of lack of security—of the simple and natural right to go to sports stadiums as spectators, and robbed of a straightforward leisure activity. In several instances, when the national team has had sensitive matches, Iranian women have gone to the stadium but been prevented by policemen from taking their seats. We believe that nothing can justify officials' refusal to fulfill their responsibilities. It is the duty of the police and the forces of law and order to safeguard the security and dignity of Iranian citizens throughout the country.

The letter also declared that at 4.30 PM on 8 June the women would gather in front of Freedom Stadium's west gate, and that they expected officials to prepare a place for them inside.

Wednesday was an exciting day. Women journalists were well-represented in our more-than-thirty-strong group. We all gathered in front of the office of the newspaper *Eqbal*, which was subsequently banned, and at 4.00 PM the bus set off for the stadium. Only later did we realise how brave our driver was to accept such an assignment, which could have led to his dismissal. It took us about half an hour to get there. There was a lot of traffic. We went around Freedom Square and headed towards Freedom Stadium. I've often wondered many times whether my understanding of those place-names is different from a man's. I've yet to come up with an answer. In front of the west gate there is a small open space, a hollow circle of cement across from a grassy area with trees. That's where we got off. For many of us, it was the first time. All around, there were young men with painted faces, wearing the team's colours. Some of them carried the Iranian flag over their shoulders. They looked at us with surprise and, occasionally, made some mocking remark as they passed.

We approached the gatekeepers' cabin, where tickets are checked. Immediately sensing danger, the gatekeepers shut the gates. We said: 'We've bought our tickets. We want to go in.' We even explained that we'd coordinated things in advance, and so on. Before we could finish, the gatekeepers insisted: 'You can't come in. Get away from here!'

But we were stubborn. We hadn't come all this way and gone to all this trouble for nothing. We refused to move. A crowd of men gathered. They all looked astonished, as though they were hearing the strangest things. Our group and the crowd of men around us drew the attention of the police. The buses carrying the players would soon be arriving. The women, despairing of a successful resolution, decided to sit down together in a circle. Clasping each other's hands, they started quietly, slowly singing feminist songs, then chanted: 'Women's rights are half of freedom.' This later became the slogan of our campaign; it meant that freedom should be distributed equally, without discrimination.

As the chants and songs grew louder, the circle of police tightened around us. Some of the women decided to start a dialogue with the police commander in order to resolve any misunderstanding. Several women, including Shadi Sadr, Mahboubeh Abbasqolizadeh and me, broke off from the group. But our dialogue proved fruitless. The police had only one thing to say: 'Get up and don't make a scene!' Of course we, too, had only one thing to say: 'No!'

Then they argued: 'In the middle of all these men! What do you want to do? Go and watch it at home!' We replied: 'Find a place in some corner for us and take us there under guard. If we'd wanted to sit at home, we wouldn't be here.' To cut a long story short, what we had to say wasn't making the slightest impression on them but they couldn't get us to pack up and go away either. We rejoined our friends.

The policemen were calm. Batons in hand, they were waiting for us to make the first move. The presidential elections were approaching, and they didn't want

negative publicity as the country's top police commander, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, was one of the candidates.

We sat on the ground, in front of the gate, and said: 'If you're not going to let us in, the gate may as well stay shut.' Many of the stadium's own vehicles needed to get in, but our protest was preventing them, so they turned around to try a different route. Suddenly someone shouted: 'The players' bus is going in through the other gate!' I don't know why, but we suddenly got up and started running. Before the gatekeepers knew what was happening, the entrance was blocked by the same thirty to thirty-five women stubbornly seeking a way into Freedom.

At this point, the stadium's security personnel became involved. They had to make sure the buses carrying the players, especially the Bahraini team, weren't stopped. Apparently, apart from security considerations, international regulations demand that the host's duties include ensuring that there are no impediments to the players' entry into the stadium. But we weren't there to worry about security or FIFA rules; we wanted our share.

To be honest, some of us weren't really all that keen on watching football. It was simply a question of the 'ought' and the 'ought not'. It was a question of being bullied and not submitting to bullying. This was why, at that moment, all of us felt like staunch football fans.

They opened the gate for the buses, and the security and law enforcement personnel concentrated on charging the women to force them back. The buses passed in front of us, and some of the players craned their necks to see what was happening. They went in, and we remained. The guards managed to close the gate halfway; we tried to force our way in through the gap. The gate was in the middle, with us outside and them inside. Suddenly Mahboubeh slipped, and her leg got caught in the gap under the gate. As the pressure increased, she suddenly cried out in pain. Mahboubeh was on the ground, and her leg was badly injured. We abandoned the gate and formed a ring around her. She was in tears and couldn't move her leg. Now we were angry. We started expressing our outrage at the top of our voices and demanded help.

The security forces were a bit taken aback. Apparently they hadn't expected or been ordered to injure anyone on that day. (At subsequent matches, they didn't hesitate to beat us.) We had to decide what to do very quickly. Mahboubeh needed treatment and, at the same time, it was important that the group didn't break up. We talked it over and decided that I'd go to the hospital with her, while the others remained to keep up the pressure.

At that very moment, the head of security and a couple of other people who seemed to be in charge came forward to try and negotiate a quick resolution to the whole affair. But now that one of us had been injured, nobody was prepared to back down. The ambulance arrived and Mahboubeh and I went off to Rasoul Hospital.

Those who stayed behind insisted that our demands were small and harmed no one. Why couldn't they be accepted? Finally, after arguing and explaining and rebutting every objection, the women were allowed to see the colour of Freedom beyond the gate on the terraces. Noushin is a photographer. 'What I felt was indescribable,' she said. 'All that noise, all that excitement; my heart was pounding so hard I thought it would pop out of my chest. I looked at the pitch: one big, green carpet.'

Excitement turned to amazement when it became clear that there was a group of women, including a number of actresses and others armed with political tracts, campaigning on behalf of the presidential candidates, already seated in the VIP section. It was a staggering discovery. If the excuse was that women's security couldn't be guaranteed, how was it possible for these lucky few? Sanaz shouted: 'Freedom, here we are, with no VIPs!' which turned into a chant that the group excitedly repeated in unison for a couple of minutes.

Years from now, you might read in a book, magazine or newspaper that Wednesday 8 June 2005 was the day a group of Iranian women were able, after twenty-six years, to fulfill their right to watch football directly without benefiting from special privileges. One of them, Masoumeh, expressed it more radically as 'a feminine victory in breaking an idiotic taboo'.

But if you think this idiotic taboo will collapse because it's been challenged once, or if you imagine that reasonable conduct is always met by polite response, then you don't know the conditions under which we live, where the hope of attaining the simplest rights suddenly becomes a mere dream. This first victory became intermingled with the joy of qualifying for the 2006 World Cup. The national team would go to Germany, but other adventures awaited us.

A month later the elections were held, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took over as President. He was the only presidential candidate to make no positive comments about women during the campaign speeches. It was obvious that their rights were not important to him even as campaign slogans. If we had struggled during Khatami's presidency, we should despair of any opening under a hardline fundamentalist.

But politics, like football, can always turn up unexpected results. A few months into Ahmadinejad's tenure, at a time when there were murmurs about hardline measures on the *hejab* and reducing women's working hours, the President suddenly issued a message that there was no reason why women shouldn't be allowed to attend sporting events, and that he would try to bring about conditions that would enable them to do so.

The President's pronouncement caused a great deal of surprise, especially in the press. Some people came to the conclusion that they'd been too hasty in their judgement, that he wasn't as hardline as they'd thought. Others interpreted it as a tactic to distract attention away from political problems, which were worsening in the light of the nuclear issue. There were some who described him as 'wise', as someone who believed women's demands and responded to them. But the reaction among most women was that his words were a kind of demagoguery intended to seem more practical than a reformist appeal to the masses, something to silence women temporarily and make them forget other demands — such as actually changing the law.

It must have seemed an easy option to the government, but even this minimal concession would prove difficult. The proposal was immediately denounced by hardline clerics, who attacked the President and described his words as 'injudicious'. The masculine environment of the sports stadium was held to be detrimental to women's well-being. The issue was also presented as purely religious: Islam did not countenance women viewing men's bodies so closely. When these opinions were endorsed by Ayatollah Khamenei, the country's spiritual leader, it became impossible for the President to continue, and the matter came to an abrupt close.

But for us, the game wasn't over. Encouraged by our success at the Bahrain match, the network of phone calls, emails, text messages and meetings had grown into the 'campaign for the defence of women's right to enter sport venues'. We didn't want to be fooled by cheap political manoeuvres any more than by the proposed reduction in women's working hours (an attractive proposition on the face of it, but detrimental in the long run: few important jobs would go to anyone obliged to work reduced hours on a full salary).

We were determined to pursue our goal in a coordinated way, but in the current climate we couldn't have expected to be greeted with kindness as we set out for the Iran–Costa Rica match in March 2006. Sure enough, the atmosphere had changed. Suppressed hostility had turned into actual violence. Our 'We don't want to be offside' placard was no defence against the baton charges. There is a photo of the incident showing a soldier threatening a young woman. His leg is lifted high, as though he is about to kick her in the face. The picture is important because it lets people actually see the kind of harsh treatment we received, but it doesn't tell the whole story.

Following the initial attacks, the women — who had been able to regroup — were offered an alternative solution. They were invited to board a bus, which would take them into the stadium via another gate. Surprise became suspicion and finally sadness as, having accepted the offer, it became clear that the bus's destination was far from Freedom Stadium; it was Freedom Square, in the city centre.

Anger, humiliation, disgust at being lied to: none of these emotions taken singly convey what we felt as we stepped off that bus. But despite being tricked and beaten, we still resolved to persevere. We decided to publicise our campaign by issuing statements, disseminated via the media, especially women's rights websites. The first, in April 2006, set out our position in clear terms:

The struggle by Iranian women to enter sports venues began exactly when the Islamic Republic of Iran's ruling system — by implementing policies for gender segregation in public places — fuelled discrimination against and inequality for women in exercising their rights as citizens. Officials' actions in barring women from sports venues have always been on the pretext of the inability to ensure security and a suitable environment, whereas one of the consequences of this kind of gender segregation is precisely that it makes public places unsafe and violent.

In the months before the Iran–Bosnia game, we issued more statements and made plans. This time we rented a bus so we all could go together, and each of us had a white scarf with our slogan 'Women's rights are half of freedom' printed on it. Almost certain that we wouldn't be allowed entry, we wanted to make our message visible to everybody. When we finally arrived at the familiar grassy space outside the gates, it quickly became clear that the authorities were also prepared.

The entire area was full of law enforcement officers, including a large number of policewomen obviously intended for any possible confrontation with us. But we were not their immediate concern. They were more interested in the reporters and photographers who had also anticipated our arrival. Each photographer was individually summoned to the parked police cars. Digital photos were deleted, and film removed. In one or two cases, the cameras themselves were confiscated, and everybody was warned that their press cards would be revoked if a single shot of the event ever appeared.

Obviously, it wasn't a good situation. We wouldn't see the game, and now it looked like nobody else would get a chance to see what we had to say. Having experienced the way the security forces responded to direct action, we opted for dialogue. Leaving the main group seated in a circle, three representatives approached the police lines. Ominously, the officer in charge knew our names. His tone was friendly, conciliatory. He reminded us of what the President had said about establishing suitable conditions, and appealed for patience and calm. But believing that promises wouldn't help us get into the stadium, we continued to argue. We persisted, and he remained unmoved. A second policeman joined the discussion. This one spoke in a harsher, less polite way.

Suddenly, the gate half-opened, and our friends jumped up and started running towards it. The policewomen moved to intercept them. In the confusion, I saw my friend Fariba being dragged towards a police van. I went to help her, but was seized from all sides by several policewomen. As we struggled, the *chador* worn by one of them fell open, and I was astonished to see that she was pregnant. For a moment I forgot how much they were hurting me. It was incredible that a woman carrying a baby should be put in such a potentially violent situation. I was soon sitting in the back of a police van next to Fariba. The friendly policeman reappeared and ordered us out. Once again he asked us to calm down, to be reasonable and leave. But, angry and upset, we rejoined the rest of the group, which was once again sitting down in front of the gate.

I couldn't get the pregnant policewoman out of my head. She was apparently in charge of the ring that surrounded us. We began to sing the Iranian Women's Movement song as loud as we could ('O Woman, you, the source of life, the time for servitude has passed. A different world is possible, this movement will bring it forth...'). The louder we sang, the more they looked at us with contempt. Finally, one of them standing nearer to me than the rest sneeringly enquired whether the reason that we were so keen to applaud a bunch of men was that we had no lives or homes. I explained that our group included a journalist, a researcher, a jurist, an MA in History and a BSc in Mathematics, but it didn't make any difference. The policewoman stood firm, and the White Scarves continued to sing.

After about an hour, with the end of the game approaching, we decided to leave before the rest of the crowd came out. Our chanting, singing busload of White Scarves drew plenty of attention as we drove back into the city. Teasing remarks, laughter, gestures of solidarity, silent admiration and, of course, ridicule: I saw many things on that bus ride, but I didn't see freedom. No matter where I looked, there was no sign of it. Maybe it prefers to be a statue overlooking a square, or a street name, or a forbidding wall that defines a stadium's boundaries and a spectator's gender. I didn't see freedom, so I cannot tell how good it feels to be near it when I speak about my rights and fight for it along with my friends.

As I write these lines, I don't know what we'll do next. I don't know if we'll continue to issue statements or not. I don't know if we'll gather outside the stadium again or organise some other kind of rally. All I know for certain is that the White Scarves are definitely not going to back down.

Photo Essay **Abbas Kowsari** Text **Samaneh Ghadarkhan**

Dragnet Tehran

These women are the law

Iranian policewomen made their first official public appearance during the 2006 demonstrations on International Women's Day, 8 March. Wielding long-handled green batons, they attacked crowds of peacefully protesting women, forcing them to disperse. A few days later, the police chief of the country's Law Enforcement Force (LEF), Esmail Ahmadi-Moqaddam, described the policewomen as 'the protectors of society's virtue and the manifestation of compassion and kindness'.

Speaking during the graduation ceremony of the third group of female cadets from the Academy of Law Enforcement Sciences at the Kowsar Higher Education Centre, Ahmadi-Moqaddam remarked that the female perspective would replace the police force's male perspective, adding: 'The baton and personal defence movements should not be associated with the image of LEF policewomen.' It was the opposite impression the women police officers gave on their first outing.

In 2003, then-police chief Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf[1] obtained authorisation from the country's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the *ulema* (religious authorities) to create policewomen units on the conditions that they be trained separately from policemen, wear the *chador* on duty and be segregated from their male counterparts during police operations.

Later, Qalibaf took the unusual step of authorising men and women to go on joint missions together. By the time he left his post in 2005, the first group of women police graduates started working, with the possibility of rising to the rank of commander and inspector. However, once Qalibaf stepped down women graduates of the LEF Academy were reduced to Islamic guidance, religious duties promoting virtue and prohibiting vice, and women's security checks at the airports.

Last year, a crash programme to combat women who did not strictly observe the Islamic dress code saw policemen and women sitting together inside cars as part of 'Special Guidance Patrols' targeting 'bad *hejab*', or women judged inappropriately dressed in public, wearing too much makeup or colourful scarves. The policewomen, whose ranks were sewn on the tips of their sleeves, told offending women to cover themselves up or, if necessary, arrested them. It was reported on the BBC Persian Service that the number of arrests were rising.

In Iran, the training of policewomen began in 1966, initially as non-commissioned officers, with officer training introduced by 1969. Until the Revolution, women received the same training as men at the police academy. Although their responsibilities were supposed to be similar as well, they were mainly absorbed into traffic-related duties. By the start of the Iran–Iraq War, when fundamental changes took place to accommodate religious Islamic law in government, the inclusion of women in law enforcement was halted and existing officers who received training under the Pahlavis were moved into civil administration. In accordance with Article 196 of the Armed Forces Employment Law, passed in 1987, women were only allowed to take up health-related posts and, on this basis, some of them went into the armed forces.

In the 1990s, policewomen were deployed in administrative posts and began working, with certain restrictions, in LEF sectors such as police stations, the passport office and licensing and traffic centres. When, in 1998, the *Majlis* (Parliament) ratified an amendment to Article 20 of the LEF Employment Law, the LEF was allowed to employ women, and its academy began laying the groundwork for their acceptance and training.

By 2000, the first group of female students was accepted into the LEF Academy after sitting for a nationwide university entrance exam and fulfilling the following qualifications: that they be Muslims who observed *shari'a*; Iranian nationals who upheld the constitution; at least 160 cm tall; the recipients of a minimum mark of 14 out of 20 in the national end-of-school exam; and aged between eighteen and twenty-three.

From 1999 onwards, policewomen were trained for law enforcement, intelligence, criminal investigation and traffic-related duties. In 2003, the first group of women officers, numbering about 200, graduated from the academy, and the first comprehensive officer course started in 2004. Presently, 400 policewomen are taking diploma and BA courses at the LEF Academy.

Commander Mohammad Rafi'-Rafi'inia, who heads the academy, emphasised to the Iranian Labour News Agency that the women's training had been drawn up with 'the aim of preserving Islamic values and norms and increasing the security of women and children in society'.

Interestingly, the graduation ceremony of the policewomen mirrors a changing role. Photojournalist Abbas Kowsari covered the one in 2005, illustrated here. He observed: 'During Qalibaf's time as police chief, policewomen performed many martial arts and chase routines, including climbing walls and jumping out of the windows of moving cars. But after he stepped down, that training was eliminated. Last year's ceremony was limited to a parade, speeches, target practice and the loading of revolvers by blindfolded policewomen graduates. No photographers were allowed.' He went on to quote Ahmadi-Moqaddam's speech to the graduates: 'You're the police, but you shouldn't lose your maternal instincts and commit violent acts.'

Kowsari was taken by the women's physical appearance, and wondered whether the students lived at home or within the militarised environment of the academy. He explained: 'I've performed my military service, and it seems to me that it must be difficult for women to endure such a regimented, male atmosphere.' He also thought they suffered a professional hazard: they wanted to be tough, but feminine as well.

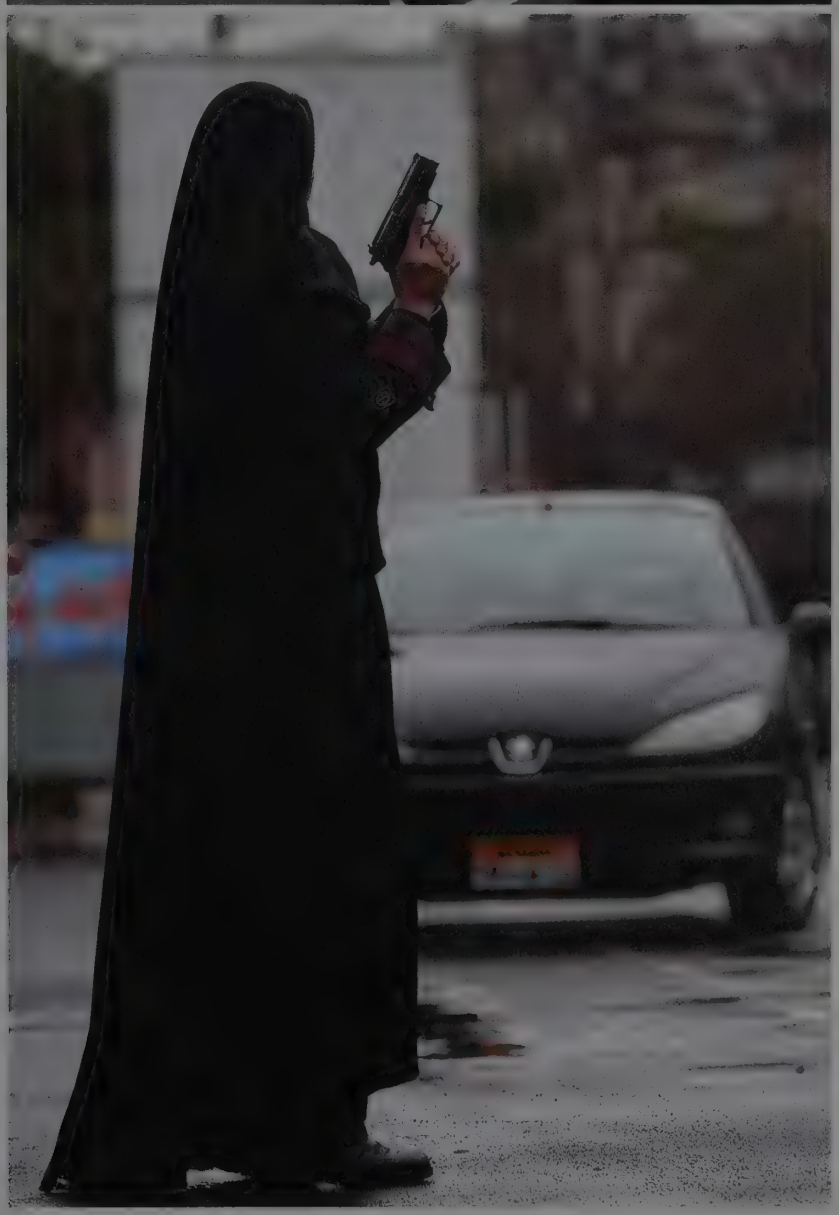
Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

1 Since 2005, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf has been the mayor of Tehran.

نیروی انتظامی
ملت است
امروز کار
عبادت

POLICE
تهران بزرگ
گشت انتظامی

باشد.
۱۶ ب ۸۱۸



First Thing Tomorrow Morning

Imagine that you're an old Peykan-59.[1] No, don't imagine it, be certain of it, because if there's a stupid accident, everyone's going to call you a 'Peykan' anyway. Your tyres are treadless, but you've got a shiny dashboard. A big heart-shaped keyring dangles from your mirror and is even inscribed with some illegible letters. But on the mirror itself you've written, in good handwriting, 'souvenir of love'. You've put a packet of dried melon seeds next to the gearshift and you've stuck an Internet card on the car cigarette holder. Your sunglasses are on the dashboard and, in the left-hand corner of the windshield, there's a basket of pink plastic flowers.

It's a painful situation. It's pathetic. I accept that. But in a few seconds you're going to become a Peykan-59.

Not all Peykans are buff, but they are dapper. Your colour is right, but you don't seem to be dapper because, despite the traffic, no one is glancing at you. Instead, everyone's eyes are on the car in front of you, a classy, fully automatic white Peugeot-85.

Everything is proceeding very normally, but an unending braking sound makes you glance in the rear-view mirror. A big black Nissan Patrol is screeching in order not to hit you, the Peykan. The screeching continues, and the Patrol becomes bigger and bigger behind your 'souvenir of love'. Ultimately it hits you and you, the Peugeot.[2]

You're so naïve that, before reaching for the door handle, you search recall on your mobile for a good body shop. You get out, and all three of you wait for a policeman. You wait and wait till you're good and vexed. When you see him in the distance at last, it cheers you up but, up close, he upsets you. The dear policeman fines you because the car is undrivable, and because it's holding up traffic. You object; he raises the fine. You argue, you try to reason with him; he threatens you. The dear policeman is of the view that you talk too much, and believes he can wreck your life.

1 The numbers after the make of car refer to years on the Iranian calendar. (13)59 corresponds to March 1980–1 and (13)85 to March 2006–7. 2 A Peykan is an inexpensive, domestically assembled car that has now been discontinued. But it will probably remain the most frequently seen car in Iran for years to come. A Patrol is an SUV. The Peykan, the Patrol and the 'classy' Peugeot are very evocative to anyone reading the story in Tehran, a shared joke between the author and the reader. For example, the author assumes, and the reader readily accepts, that in any accident between a Peykan, a Patrol and a Peugeot it is the Peykan that will be turned into a carcass. As a car, the Peykan effectively represents the everyman in Tehran.

He makes you sorry you were born. On the accident report he writes: 'The Patrol doesn't have a driving licence,' and leaves. They attach you to the Patrol with a rope and you're dragged to the insurance bureau. The Peugeot has sped ahead. When you get there, you realise you've made a mistake. Insurance doesn't accept your accident report. You need to have another accident report filled out that's accepted by it. That form is issued by the Traffic Centre, but it's now after office hours and it all carries over to first thing tomorrow morning. You, the Peykan, must set off earlier so that you can get your carcass to the centre. You nearly kill yourself, but you make it. Everyone is there, and there aren't any problems. At noon, it's your turn to be inspected. The police officer says: 'It says on the accident report that the Patrol doesn't have a driving licence.' The Patrol says: 'That's a lie', and shows his licence. The officer isn't convinced, and is of the opinion that the same cop must now put it in writing that the Patrol has a licence. The Peugeot, who is a doctor, says: 'He isn't lying, is he? He's showing it to you.'

The officer is of the opinion that the Peugeot has slandered him. The Peugeot declares that he would rather die than do such a thing and that he had, in fact, been referring to the original cop. The officer accepts that the Peugeot would be better off dead but is not prepared to accept that a cop, who is a servant of the state, may be called a liar. The Peugeot says that momentary madness made him say what he said, and that he had, in fact, been referring to the Patrol. The Patrol confirms this. The officer accepts everything that's been said but, in order to prove the existence of the licence that's in the Patrol's pocket, the Patrol must find the same cop and have him verify it with his signature.

The Peugeot and you, the Peykan, wait for the Patrol to return. At six in the evening the Patrol returns with a signature worth a few thousand *tomans*, but before it's your turn night has fallen and it all carries over to first thing tomorrow morning. Tomorrow is Friday. The doctor, the Peugeot, is off work but the Patrol, an air steward, won't be back before one o'clock. In view of the officer's magnanimity and his expressive suggestions, two o'clock on Friday is a suitable time as he'll unquestionably be very busy on Saturday.

At two o'clock sharp all three of you are sitting and waiting with all the necessary documents. At five o'clock sharp, the master arrives. You're first in the queue because you've been waiting since yesterday. One of the accident claimants complains that the officer is three hours late. A woman joins in. The officer bellows, pinning the fellow to his seat, and calls the guards. They call the police. The woman is of the opinion that there are laws in this country and that they can drag the officer through the mud. The Patrol and the Peugeot laugh. The others make matters worse, and ultimately you, the Peykan, are not working at all today. It all carries over to first thing tomorrow morning.

You and the Patrol are waiting, with all the documents, for the Peugeot to arrive so that you can finally get the accident report and go to the insurance bureau. But someone brings a message from the Peugeot saying he's had an accident and won't be able to make it. True enough, it all carries over to first thing tomorrow morning, but if you were a classy, fully automatic white Peugeot-85 wouldn't you — in all honesty — wish you were a Peykan-59?

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

Sayyed Ali, a descendent of the Prophet Mohammad, serves *ghalyan* (waterpipe) in the Ghahveh Khaneh, a café for men.

Guys in the Hood

Before the Revolution, I was a member of the Iranian national swimming team. We practised many hours every day, sharing a pool with girls and many 'uptown' people. I am from a traditional 'downtown' family of fruit sellers. I felt far away from the uncovered bodies and the ideas of the wealthy parents and drivers who sat in the balcony of the pool taking photographs. I worked hard to be a good student and took small jobs throughout my childhood to pay for my studies, but my family was too busy making ends meet to take an interest in my education or come to see me swim.

I saw there was another world beyond the opportunities available to me under the repressive regime of the Shah. Like the vast majority of Iranians I felt trapped by the static atmosphere and wanted change. I became a revolutionary. After the Revolution, I signed up as a *Basij*[1] soldier to help the new government achieve our dreams.

They sent me to the border of Afghanistan to fight the war on drugs. Every month they publicly hanged dozens of drug dealers. I looked at their faces and heard them pray for their families before they were executed. I didn't see demonised criminals, just more poor people who lived in a desert and had no other means to make money.

I returned to Tehran. I knew nothing of art. I painted portraits of martyrs from the Revolution at the Centre for the *Basij*.

I had had enough of being a soldier but hadn't served out my military service. My cousin suggested I try to go to university and study art to become exempt. Somebody told me about a class that would prepare me for my entrance exam.

The first time I went, a girl answered the door. The class was surprised and scared to see me. I was still dressed like a *Basij* with a small beard. It was 1981 and the police were very tough. The girls quickly covered their hair, it took a year before my teacher trusted me. They were copying the great masters: Michelangelo, Matisse and Picasso. Seeing those paintings opened an amazing new space for me. After three months I was the best in the class, but it was difficult for them to accept me. I decided not to go to university but do it my own way.

The war with Iraq had started, the streets were full of black banners mourning the martyrs. We had little or no electricity and work and food was scarce. I never used the colour black. I was painting to escape all the suffering around me.

I wanted to leave Iran but I needed to complete my military service to get a passport. I was angry and disillusioned; I didn't want to help the government so I didn't tell them I was a painter. I was sent to the south, but not to the frontlines. The general disliked me, I was different; my heart wasn't in it. He found me listening to the BBC and music on the radio. But before he could send me into combat, I revealed that I was a painter. It saved my life. I was given a car, a studio, everything I needed.

My first portrait was a huge red painting of Imam Khomeini. They were shocked and asked me why it was red. I answered, 'Because it is blood; it is the Revolution.' They put it outside the army office in the street. The first night it was stolen, I still don't know why.

I was ordered to make martyrs' portraits for their families. They were displayed in the streets before they were taken home. One day I made a painting in an Iraqi city that was occupied by Iran during the war: a portrait of a young martyr in a helmet and *Basij* uniform, in the background was Karbala and Imam Hossein's grave. Imam Hossein is the most important Imam and symbol for the Shi'is; he was martyred fighting for change and against corruption. This was particularly symbolic since no Iranians could travel to his tomb in Iraq during the war. I painted tulips, the flowers of the martyrs, dog tags and the hand of Abu'l Faze, Imam Hossein's brother, whose hand was cut off when he went to collect water for the starving children during the battle.

When my military service finished, I didn't want to go abroad any more. The war had changed me. I couldn't leave; I was too close to and intertwined with Iran.

Ten days after I returned, Tehran was bombed. I was in the bank and a huge bomb exploded outside. The bank was destroyed and the glass front shattered on top of me. Many people died around me and I almost lost my leg.

After one year and many operations, I returned to work as a fruit seller. I had realised how cheap life is and how easily dreams can be lost. At night I turned my shop into a studio. The colour had gone: I made a series about war on huge pieces of packing paper, the cheap paper of the poor families of the real martyrs — black and white images of body bags and confusion, my diary of the war.

Years later, despite many exhibitions and travels abroad, I felt even closer to the area where I had grown up and the people who lived there. I decided to look again at my ideas about martyrdom. The government still says the Iranian people are living martyrs; sixty million people ready to die for their ideology. It occurred to me that

1 The Basij was a voluntary paramilitary force founded by Khomeini in 1979. Thousands of young boys participated in the 'human wave' attacks during the Iran–Iraq War.

I wanted to see my own portrait before I died. I wanted to paint my neighbours and friends before they were 'martyred'. I went to the very south of Tehran and found two young boys, painting cheap commissioned portraits of local people. They assisted me in producing this series. I asked people how they wanted their portrait to be painted? How would they like to be remembered? What were their fantasies? How could I represent their ideas in their portraits? Now the government has replaced martyr paintings with impermanent digital prints. I wanted to use a technique that my subjects would be proud of — downtown portraits and propaganda painting.

Page 64 This man, Sayyed Ali, works in a tea house, where only men can go, Ghahveh Khaneh. It is in the centre of downtown Tehran. People from that area are called *shoush*, they are famous for being very working class and tough. If Iranians see somebody poor or common, they might say they are *shoush* but the people who live there are proud of who they are. Many homeless kids live in this area and sleep in the teahouse at night. Sometimes I go to smoke and catch up with what's happening in Iran. Sayyed Ali is a descendent of the Prophet Mohammad's family, which is why he always wears a green hat. He is a theatrical storyteller, proud to be serving *ghalyan* (waterpipe), and spending all day telling his customers dramatic tales. I made his portrait in a green sunset to show the sadness of the martyrs. The government has recently banned smoking in teahouses to stop people talking about politics and staying out late. It is as if they have severed a part of our culture and history.

Page 68 This is a portrait of two men who exercise everyday at 5 AM in the downtown *zoorkhaneh* (traditional wrestling gym). They are very religious, they dream of going to Mecca, not the USA. They are humble and help the people in their community. Their existence is hard but they find refuge in their beliefs and enjoy life. I feel they are an important symbol of everything we are losing in Iran today. I put them in front of a backdrop of 'Chai Shahrzad'. Shahrzad is the beautiful queen in the tale of *The Thousand and One Nights*, she is emerging from the tea. Tea is very important in Iran and people always bought this brand because of its iconographic significance. Before the Revolution she had flowing hair. Afterwards they wanted to ban this tea but instead the company put a scarf on her head. I painted her because I wanted to remind people that although the Revolution happened, in many ways, beneath the surface, nothing changed.

Page 69 Javad is an Iranian pop star. He is perfectly 'downtown' — kitsch and unashamed. His videos are romantic and emotional, full of flowers and waterfalls. His songs advise people to be humble and lovely to each other. He is sixty-two years old. Around the time of the Revolution, he was at the peak of his career, everybody was singing his songs in the street but no TV or radio would ever broadcast his work, it was forced completely underground because he was *kocheh bazzar* (from downtown). I respect him because after thirty years he is still singing and full of fantasies. Of course, the current regime doesn't allow him to do anything either, which is ironic because all his songs are telling people to be good and are even religious sometimes. He is so famous in Iran that if people see something tasteless and colourful they said it is '*Javad*'. He is waving to show he is proud and a man of the people. His background is the flag of Abu'l Faze from Ashura. It is not the Iranian national flag. He told me that he still dreams of having a concert in a huge stadium before hundreds of thousands of Iranians. I painted his portrait because his dreams are killed, he is already a live martyr.

Khosrow Hassanzadeh talked to Eugenie Dolberg

A man, who exercises each morning
in a traditional *zoorkhaneh* wrestling gym,
builds his strength with weights
that celebrate the fortitude of Imam Ali.

In the *zoorkhaneh*, men share their passions – wrestling and drinking Chai (Tea) Shahrzad.

Javad Yassari is a popular downtown singer.

Surrounded by imagery commemorating sacrifice, the artist's brother Rashid stands in a field of tulips and in front of the hand of Abu'l Faze, which was severed during the battle of Karbala.

Film director Mohammad Shirvani wants to be remembered in the *hammam*.

Art **Nicky Nodjoumi** Text **Octavio Zaya**

Looking for the Axis of Evil

Entering the universe of Nicky Nodjoumi's paintings is an elusive and disorienting experience. The main characters populating his canvases, such as anonymous men in business suits, naked women, Iranian mullahs and all sorts of animals, are deceivingly familiar. And yet, the situations, encounters and interactions they undergo are hardly commonplace. In *Elegy for Tomorrow,* a group of middle-aged businessmen in black suits carry, as if it were a coffin, what appears to be a heavy container of grass on top of which stands a rusty-brown squirrel; *Enchanting Evening* portrays Mohammad Khatami, the then president of Iran, being led with a leash through the forest by a nude dancing woman; and in *Homecoming* two presumptive American politicians, unflustered by the fact that their penises are showing, wave to the viewer while distinctively holding a twig and a frog.

Despite the fact that Nodjoumi's paintings have an absurdist quality, he uses politics and cultural history for subject matter, while minimising clear references with unexpected juxtapositions to create narratives that defy literal interpretation. Nodjoumi's paintings take us to the irrational and compelling world of the imagination. His alienated figures find themselves in peculiar circumstances whose meaning is always abstruse or just out of reach. And while it seems that mocking a Muslim leader can be easily misconstrued as opportunistic at a moment when Islam (either as culprit or scapegoat) is the focal point of the political debate, for an Iranian émigré artist who is considered a prominent figure in the development of modern and contemporary art in Iran, this can be particularly daring and audacious.

Nicky Nodjoumi is a satirist with an ironic, cerebral sense of humour who follows the course that Max Ernst once expounded as 'coupling two realities which apparently cannot be coupled, on a plane which is apparently not appropriate to them'. Within this realm, Nodjoumi would not only deride Iranian mullahs but American leaders and corporate characters, as well as religious and sexual taboos, science and rationalism. And yet, despite the apparent political load of his narrative, one cannot help but presume that his images have been devoid of a clear meaning, as if Nodjoumi would have set up a strategy to defuse it. In truth, what has been characterised by the artist Shirin Neshat as Nodjoumi's 'subversive symbolism' helps him neutralise the limited political dimension of the image to ultimately display an emotional and enigmatic scenario.

What is concealed behind the political iconography is a deeply personal narrative, the narrative of existential anxieties of a person who has experienced exile, endured repression, known alienation, isolation and fear. Sometimes it is a narrative of melancholy and silence, sometimes it is a radically mute narrative, maintaining always a balance between reality and imagination, between the self and the world; avoiding certitude and moralising: creating always expectation without fulfilling it.

Photograph of *Searching for the Golden Triangle*, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 244 x 155 cm

Art and text **Sadegh Tirafkan**

Whispers of the East

In art theory, there is an assumption that calligraphy, miniatures and carpets are decorative arts devoid of conceptual meaning. While many of the people who drew, painted and weaved were not artists or even educated, their imagery was based on feelings and instincts, and evokes the timeless mystery behind them.

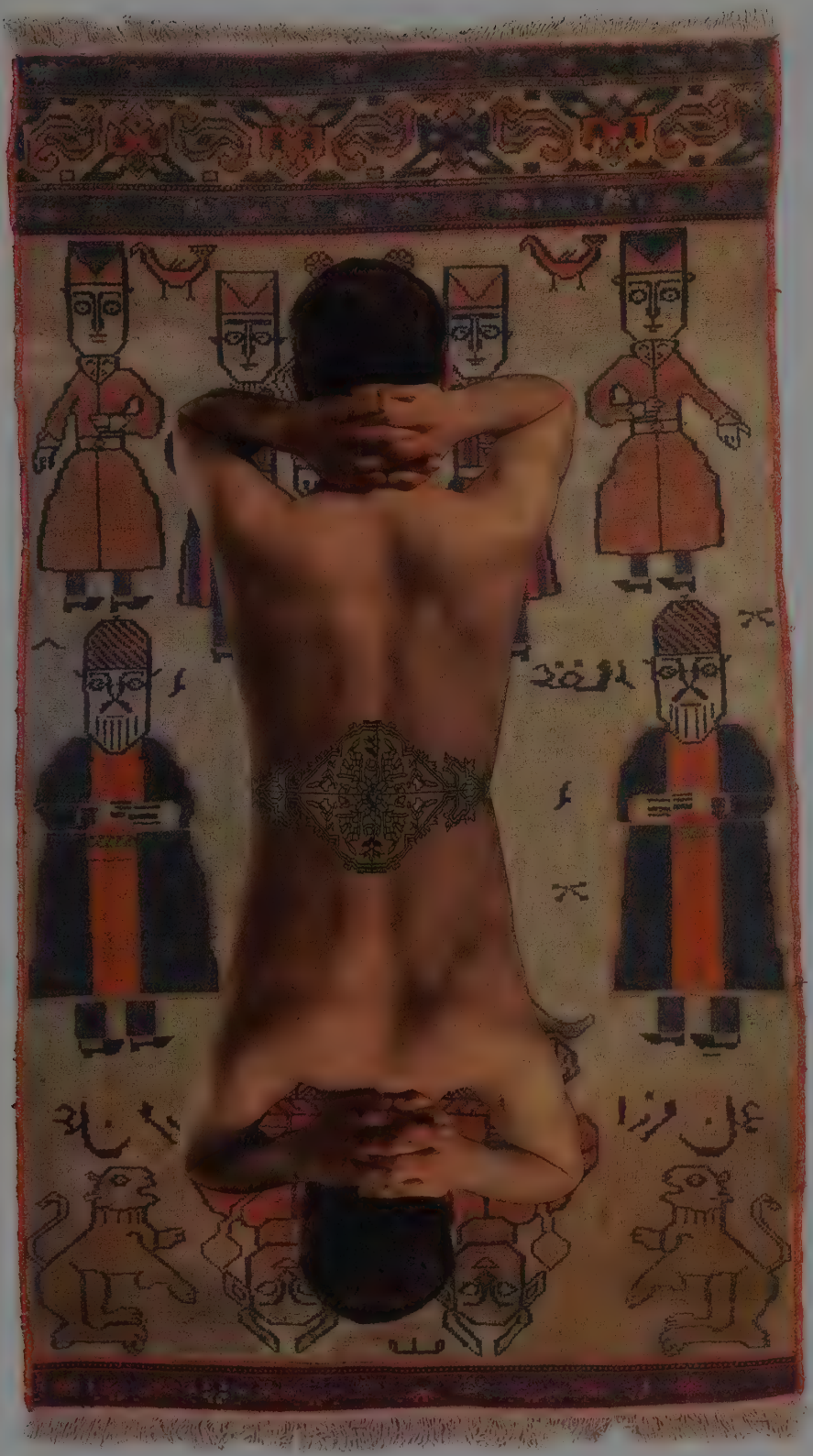
I fuse the new and the traditional together in *Whispers of the East* to warn this generation of young Iranians not to ignore their ancient history, as well as to remind them of their unique cultural inheritance. Unfortunately, there is a belief that if Third World countries want to Westernise, they must forget their past — an idea I also challenge in this work.

The older art forms shown here reveal the concept and purpose behind their making. I have added the body and bloody hands, in effect doing the same thing those other artists did before me, and confront the strictly decorative interpretation of those arts.

My body represents every, and any, Iranian. Additionally, I include myself in the work so as not to have to explain myself to a model. By only presenting the body from the torso up, I don't lose the focus of the photograph — the full body would have overpowered the background. Moreover, showing even a partially nude body in Iranian art today is considered daring.

The inclusion of US troops in the work demonstrates how strongly I believe that the war in Iraq epitomises the destruction of culture and civilisation in the Middle East.

After the Revolution, most foreign festivals and art biennials expected soft, conservative art from Iran, say, a clichéd and stereotypical version of Sufism. It was believed that Iranian artists would have nothing to do with the politics of the modern world. My work, like that of others, proves them wrong.



Text **Shirin Neshat**

Mother's Day

Ardeshir Mohassess Painter of History

Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the recent political crises in the Middle East, we have witnessed a rise of Western interest in Iranian culture. Iranian artists, writers, intellectuals and filmmakers are all finding themselves at the forefront as cultural agents — critics informing and interpreting the complexity of their culture to Western audiences. Most successful are those who, by sharing their personal narratives, have chronicled their country's recent political history. Several such artists have become hugely successful and praised for both the artistic value and political content of their art. Among such pioneers are Azar Nafisi, author of bestselling memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*; Marjane Satrapi, graphics artist and author of *Persepolis*; world-acclaimed filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami; and many others.

Ardeshir Mohassess, born in 1938 and living in exile in New York since 1976, is a legendary figure. Skilled as a political satirist, he has been celebrated as the most significant living Iranian artist to date; yet, sadly, due to illness and lack of support, he has been mostly absent and almost entirely forgotten by both the Iranian and the Western public.

Since 1963, Mohassess has produced a large and powerful body of drawings and illustrations. His career as a caricaturist began in 1962, when he started supplying cartoons and satirical drawings to the Tehran daily *Kayhan* and other local newspapers. Over the course of a decade and a half, working as a professional artist in Tehran, Mohassess produced a plethora of politically inspired drawings and cartoons that won him universal acclaim among the Iranian intelligentsia — but provoked and angered the authorities.

In many ways, an overview of Mohassess's art facilitates an understanding of the modern political history of Iran, from nineteenth to twenty-first centuries: a history that proves to be overwhelmingly dark and authoritarian. Mohassess's depiction of Iranian rulers over this timespan reveals the devastating truth that the tragedy of Iran seems to repeat itself, with no escape. He puts the kings of the Qajar period (1833–1925), Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–79), Ayatollah Khomeini (1979–89), and the current leaders all in startlingly similar categories.

Ahmad Shamloo, the beloved Iranian poet, once best described Mohassess's art, saying: 'If we are to take "caricature" to be an ironic exaggeration of facts, then Ardeshir is most certainly not a caricaturist. At least for us, the neighbours, and fellow sufferers of the familiar faces in his works, Ardeshir will remain a sharp-sighted realist — a portraitist of facts — *a painter of history.*'

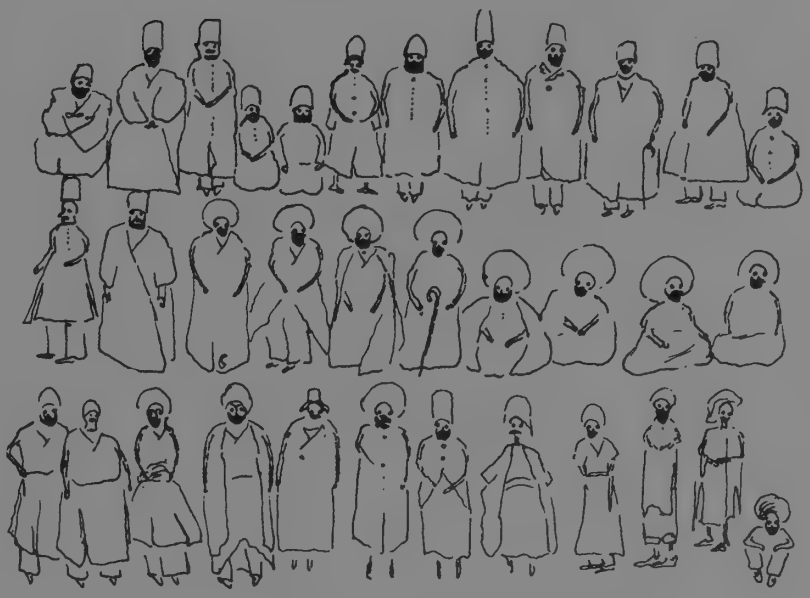
With rare skill and an astonishingly minimalist graphic style, every single line that Mohassess's pen draws serves a purpose and holds meaning. He melds ridicule and humour with profound insight and historical information, resulting in deeply disturbing and emotionally arresting images depicting the human experience.

Ultimately, Mohassess captures historical truths from the perspective of centuries of Iranian cultural development and portrays them in a timeless way. Following in the footsteps of other masters like Goya, Daumier and Picasso, Mohassess tackles the historical specificities of a nation, yet transcends all notions of time and place, arriving at a language which is utterly universal. Mohassess is an artistic treasure, and immeasurably valuable to a nation that still struggles to find its true identity, which perhaps can only achieved by aknowledging its past.

Nicky Nodjoumi selected the illustrations by Ardeshir Mohassess.

Unfinished justice and law

The king would sometimes, for test purposes, personally take to practising.

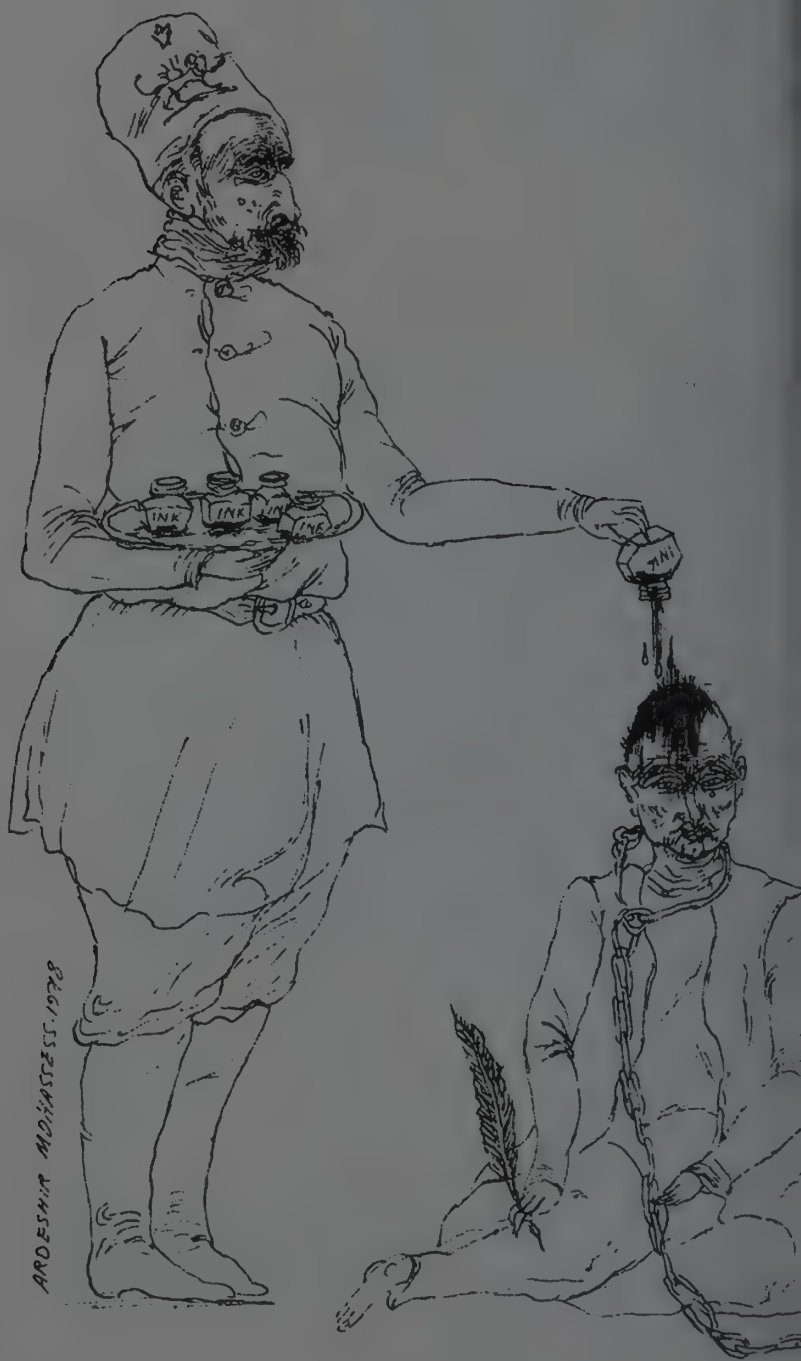


Unconsummated marriage

The king and I

The last group of adolescent guerrillas is captured and their headquarters occupied by the government's soldiers.

From right to left: editors of the newspapers of peace, justice, truth, brotherhood, and freedom after their arrest and before being sent to prison.



The king is always above the people.

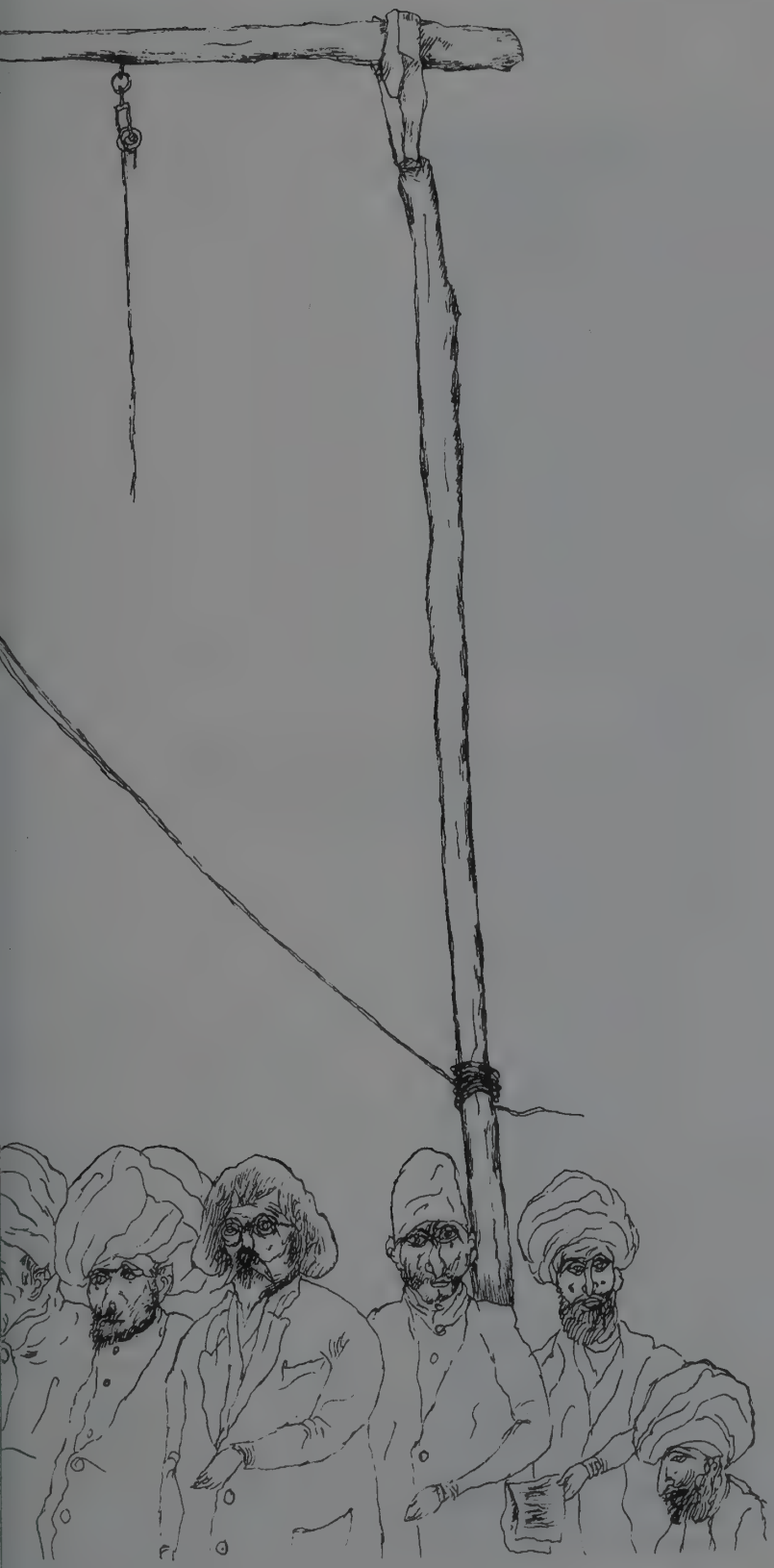


Photo essay **Majid Saeedi** Text **Roxanne Varzi**

In a CBS News interview President Ahmadinejad was asked to confirm that there are 52,000 suicide bombers in the Iranian army. Ahmadinejad's response was that if the US stopped threatening Iran, then American newsmen would not have to ask these kinds of questions.

Seeking Martyrdom

Dying for an ideal

In May 2006, photographer Majid Saeedi documented this gathering 'of a political, religious group, *gordon* (a military platoon), in Iran called the Coalition for Martyr-inspired Actions against the Enemy and Their Interests.' According to Saeedi, 'The group meets every six months for the purpose of mass public recruitment. These photographs are of their gathering in Beheshet-Zahrah Cemetery at the monument to a few Palestinian martyrs.' Beheshet-Zahrah Cemetery is the most popular address for Iran's dead, especially those who were martyred in the war with Iraq. Needless to say it is not only the country's largest cemetery, but also its most popular and largest meeting place.

As an anthropologist I find it hard to write about something I did not personally research or attend, so I can only lend some background as to how it may differ and yet emerge from earlier discourses of martyrdom culture in Iran.[1] In 1980 when the war with Iraq began, Iran's leaders were able to easily awaken the desire to die a martyr, due to a strong history and memory of martyrdom already present (dormant as a political force) in Shiite history. Historically, Shiite Islam centres on the martyrdoms of Imam Ali and Imam Hossein (and their family). These two martyrs hold an important and emotional place in Iranian culture. Their deaths are commemorated twice every year in Shiite communities, once on the nineteenth night of Ramadan, when Ali was said to have been killed in a mosque while praying, and again during the month of Muharram, when Hossein was killed on the battlefield at Karbala, allowing plenty of opportunity to re-create and remember the themes of martyrdom. A culture of martyrdom mobilised the Iranian population during the war. While the ostensible reason for martyrdom in Iran is a mystical desire for transcendence, oneness with God, the most immediate concern was a matter of national defense and political legitimacy.

As the specific culture of martyrdom created around the Iran–Iraq War fades with every passing day, there has always been a strong sentiment in the government and with a large segment of the population that it remains a main proponent of public culture. Therefore when you experience Iran in the public arena, you are confronted daily with visual reminders of the martyrdom of over 500,000 men alongside the famous martyrs at Karbala. What is interesting in these particular photographs, taken by Saeedi some twenty years after the end of the war and during a very different war in Iraq, is that there is very little reference to Karbala or specifically to the culture of the Iran–Iraq War. There are references to Islam, but not to Shiism in particular (we have headbands, but in place of invocations of Hossein, *Ya Hossein*, which is particularly Shiite, we have the *shuhada* — 'There is only one God and Mohammad is his messenger' — which all Muslims invoke, and the Quran, which all Muslims read, in Arabic), and to war (dog tags and fatigues). But neither the Islamic themes nor the war themes go back to the time when Iraq was the enemy.

Now the immediate enemy in the eyes of this group has shifted and is no longer the Iraqis but is — according to Saeedi and what we can glean from the visuals — the US, Israel and the UK. This group shuns the notion of a nation-state and rather aligns itself with the struggle of people without strong nation-states, or conventional armies. Palestinian 'suicide bombers' are brought to mind visually in the use of the *kafiyyeh* (also used in the Iran–Iraq War), covering the heads and some faces of the participants. They keep the important leaders, Khomeini and Khamenei close at hand, (a banner has a famous saying of Khamenei's: 'The Iranian people will respond twice as forcefully to any blow inflicted on them') which actually universalises the struggle within the Muslim world making it less specifically about just Iran, as these two figures are considered revolutionary leaders of the oppressed in precisely the Hezbollah regions of Lebanon and Palestine (when I was in southern Beirut I saw a number of the same photograph of Khomeini prominently displayed). The white shrouds and the Arabic invocation of martyrdom stencilled in red in place of the simple Persian *shahid*, martyr, also point more toward the Palestinian mode of martyrdom while forgoing that of the Iran–Iraq War — again moving away from the notion of a military engagement, toward that of an individual against the world — the 'suicide bomber' trope, alone, nomadic, deterritorialised. Khomeini emphasised the individual martyr at the beginning of the war with Iraq when Iran's nation-state was weakly formed and a standing army was far from ready, he believed Iran's strongest asset was not its military power but its people — the individual fighter. He once said that the people, and not a professional army, would win the war. Dog tags remain the only nod to the conventions of the past war or of an organised army. Another noticeable difference is the shift in the role of women who in the past martyrdom rhetoric (and that which still exists in the Iranian state discourse) are mourners, supporters, keepers of the hearth, but not individuals meant to be martyred.

According to Saeedi, the Coalition for Martyr-inspired Actions against the Enemy and Their Interests 'believes in remaining anonymous so as not to let the

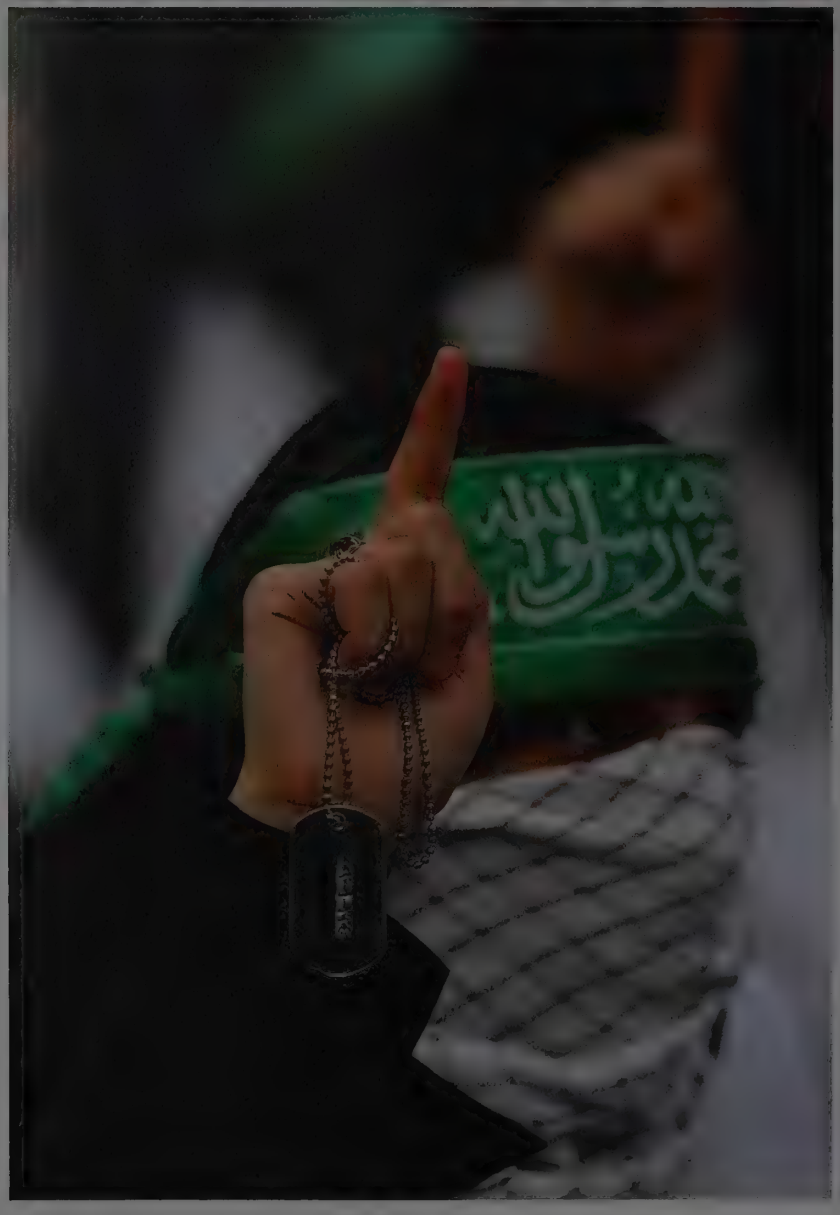
1 For a more in-depth discussion of martyrdom see Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls, Media, Martyrdom and Youth in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

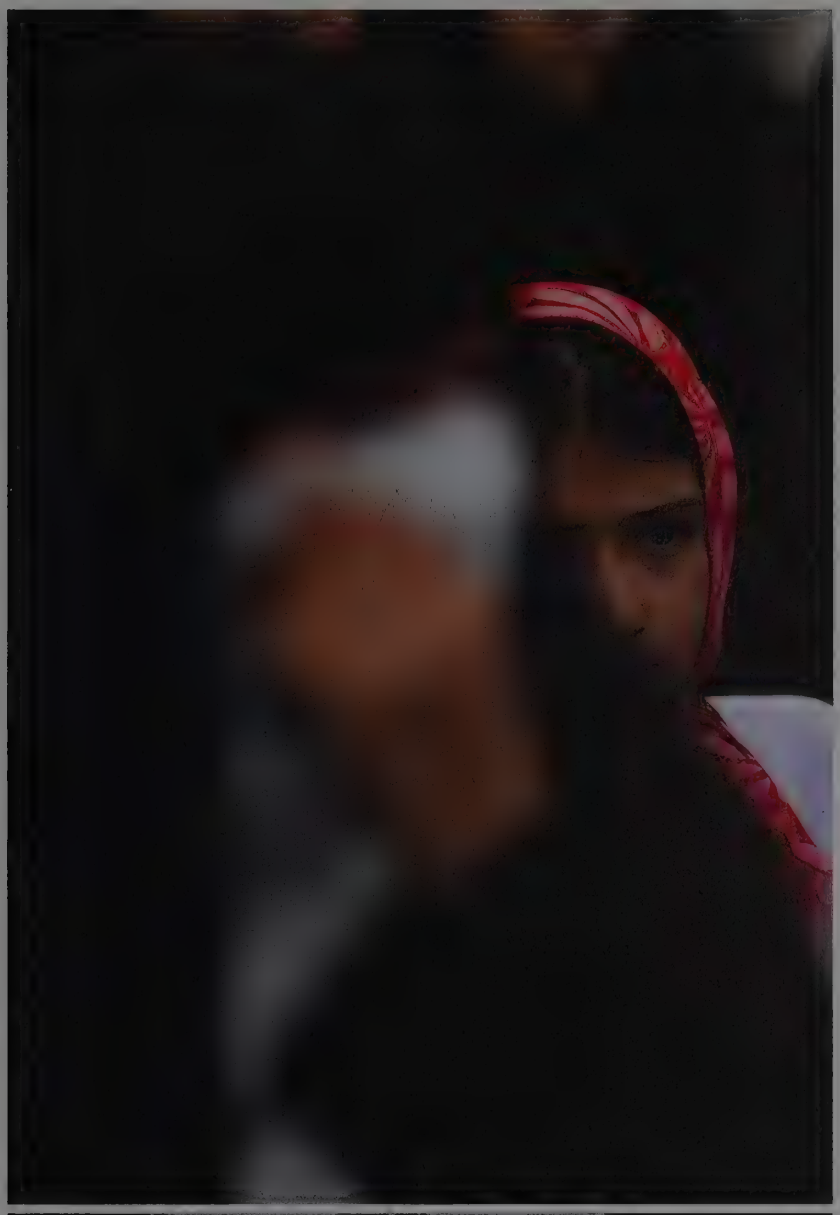
enemy know their identities. They only inform the heads of the organisation of their identity and are notified only to carry out acts of martyrdom.' In the Iran–Iraq War anonymity was not at all the issue, the issue was precisely the celebration of the unique individual whereas here that identity is completely covered: concealing faces and revealing acts. The alignment with Palestinian and Lebanese causes is not new, but the degree to which it has taken centre stage and foregone the earlier war rhetoric is. It would seem that the latest struggle that is played out here is not about a bounded nation-state but an Islamic *umma*.[2] According to Saeedi, the group is not covered in the state-run media (though he has published these photos himself in the Fars News Agency Online), making them not so much a part of the state discourse (where martyrdom was situated before) as such, but outside of it.

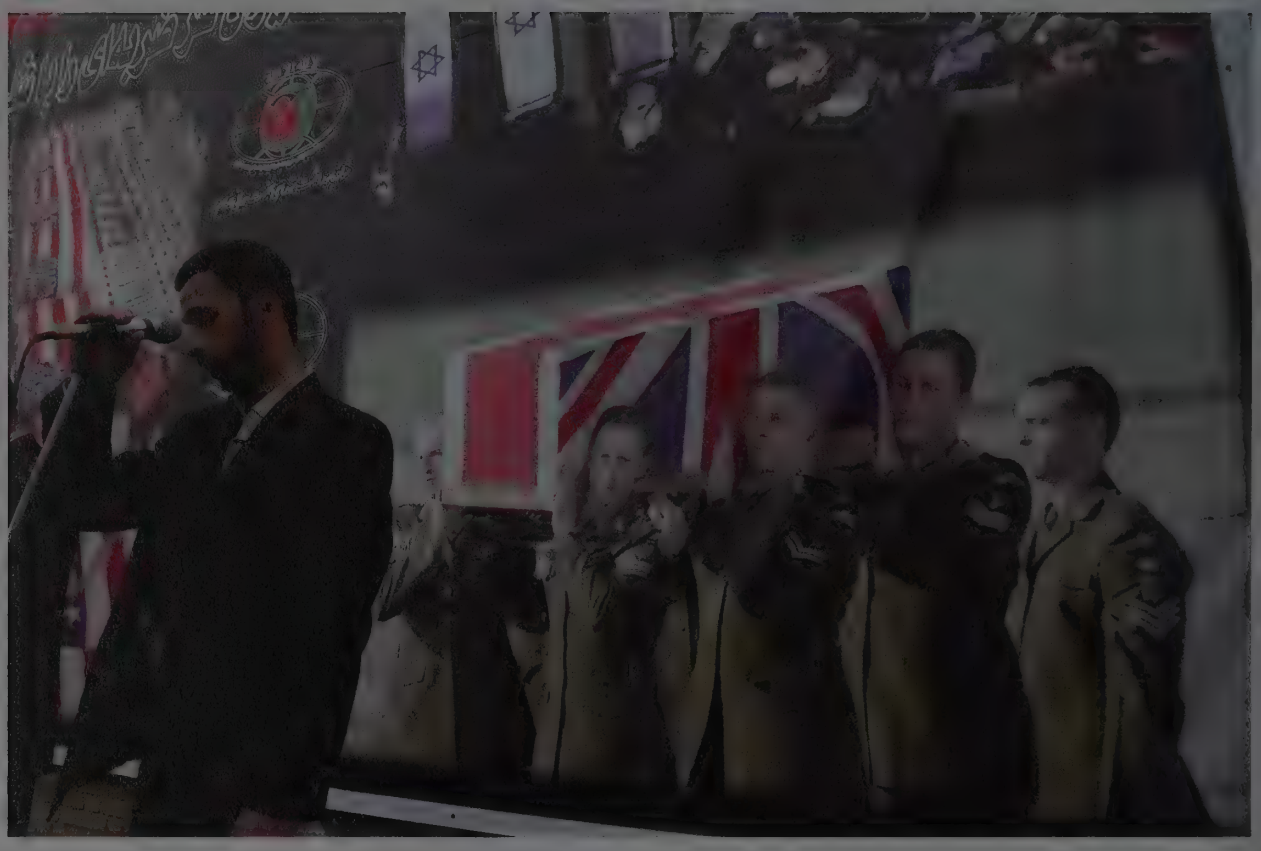
So if no one is watching, what is the point? Is this an act of recruitment, a show of force, or both? How many people actually participated? How many were serious about the endeavour? What is the role of the women, a show of support or actual preparedness for battle? And are the rows of US marine coffins a warning or a statement that what the US is doing is no different — sending its people off to be martyred? Visuals can be deceiving. Without having been there, it's hard to say what really happened. Once something is framed, one can only wonder what remains outside that frame, on the periphery, watching, participating, or walking away?

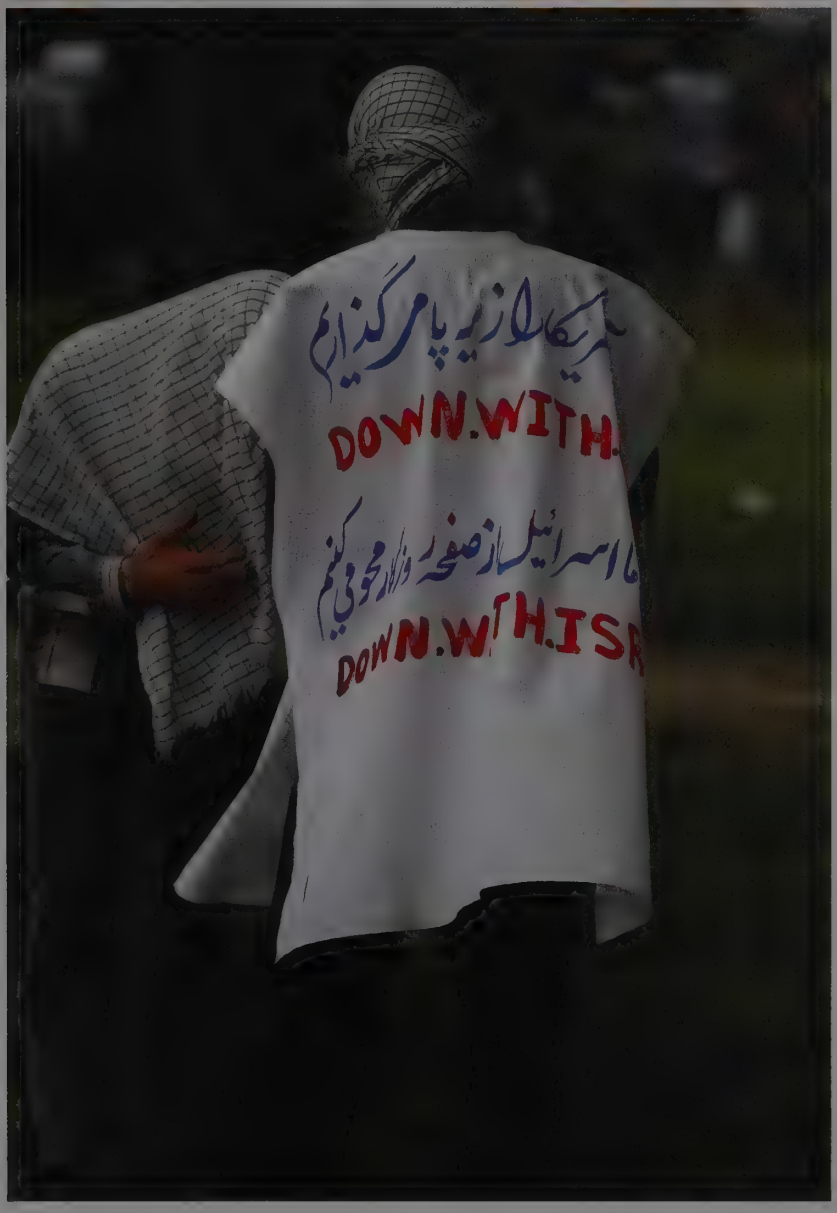
2 *Umma* in Arabic refers to the community or nation of believers worldwide.

لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله








DOWN.WITH.
DOWN.WITH.ISR

Essay **Coco Ferguson**

In 1963, Iranians marched under the banner of Imam Hossein in support of Ayatollah Khomeini, recently imprisoned by the Shah — and many lost their lives. In the Islamic Republic, the line blurs between religious passion and political passions, resulting in a fervid mix of devotion, martyrdom, yearning, high drama and low.

On 15th Khordad

In one of the world's most intense religious processions, every year millions of Shi'is pour onto the streets to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hossein

1 Last year, I spent a day in the small town of Borujerd filming a former nightclub singer who had switched to singing in prayer halls following the Revolution in 1979. While the presence of a film crew left him grinning all over his beard, his son trailed behind us in silence. When the others had gone off for ice cream and carrot juice and we were alone in the car, the son broke down in tears.

During Iran's war with Iraq, he fought at the front as a volunteer *Basij*, and later spent two years in a psychiatric hospital. According to his doctors, he had recovered from his trauma; but he was clearly still battling mental illness. He told me that every night he disappeared to graveyards to sleep in empty graves, where he sang for Imam Hossein and prayed for 'release from the chaos'. He had a beautiful voice: thin, but clear and well-trained. However, the elders had banned him from singing in his father's prayer hall.

As we drove through town, he pointed to wall paintings of martyrs who had died in the war, many of whom he had known as a child or with whom he had been to school. He described their deaths in obsessive detail, stuttering as he lingered over their final moments. During the eight-year war, which ended in 1989, Iran suffered around twice as many casualties as Britain in the Second World War, and it is little wonder that memorials to the dead still dominate Iran's public spaces. The war goes some way to explain the Islamic Republic's unshakeable feeling of victimisation and contempt for international law. Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980, but it took the United Nations — all of whose leading members supported Iraq — until Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to recognise that Iraq had been the aggressor.

For someone who grew up in a country that has not been seriously threatened by war for over two generations, Iran can seem like a nation entranced with death. Even the more pastoral public art flecked with pastel butterflies hints at the martyr in love with the candle's flame. But a quick walk past the vast frieze recently erected on London's Park Lane for 'Animals Who Died in War' is reminder enough that the commemoration of war dead is an international phenomenon. In the light of its recent violent history, the Islamic Republic's distinctive — if by no means unique — enshrining of war, death and self-sacrifice begins to make sense.

Though it may not be an aberration, the Islamic Republic's emphasis on martyrdom unnerves its global neighbours and has knock-on effects for the system itself. In its official literature, the Iranian government translates *Marg ba Amrika!* (literally, 'Death to America') as 'Down with USA!'

Overwhelmed by the constant bombardment by the Iranian media of death and martyrdom, I set out to explore the Islamic Republic's evolving take on the

Grim Reaper. My first stop was the annual round of public demonstrations commemorating central events of the Revolution and the war. The earliest event in modern Iranian history celebrated by a national holiday under the current regime is 15th Khordad, 1963, when towns all over Iran rose up in protest against the Shah's arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini. It was not the great cities of Mashad or Qom that saw the bloodiest carnage, but the small farming towns of Pishva and Varamin near the capital. Every year, throughout the country, processions remember the last stand of these pre-revolutionary martyrs.

Forty kilometres southeast of Tehran, the small town of Pishva has a reputation for drug trafficking and violence; funeral posters for young men coat its flaking walls. 'This is gangland,' my driver tells me. 'Pishva men are tough.'

In Iran, even tough men are proud to cry during public religious processions, however — and no one draws tears for Imam Ali of the Shi'is or his martyred son Hossein more deftly than Mr Allahi. Over seventy and still strikingly handsome, Mr Allahi's thick accent masks the voice of a virtuoso. During festivals and mourning days, Pishva's pre-eminent religious singer draws gulping sobs for Hossein and his family from ranks of blackclad townsmen. But Mr Allahi is more than just a serenader. He is a poet, a revolutionary and a local hero. Forty-four years ago he sang at the head of a ragged procession of farmers and labourers who defied the Shah's army and died in droves.

Pishva grew up around the mausoleum of Imamzadeh Ja'far, the son of the seventh Shi'i Imam, Musa al-Kazim. Pilgrims from as far away as Mashad flock to the modest shrine, where crowds of Afghan immigrants shuffle quickly past families who sit around the shrines to martyrs of the Iran–Iraq War and drink tea. Asked about Mr Allahi, an old woman passing segments of orange to her grandchildren waved me across the road to a taxi agency, and as I entered five men turned to stare.

A mumbled phone call later, and Mr Allahi roared up on the back of a moped. 'I am your sacrifice... *ya* Ali... God be praised... peace be with you,' he muttered, nodding to each in turn. Sunk into a creviced face, his green eyes sparkled with amusement at his peculiar audience. After some tea, Mr Allahi began his tale.

'In 1963, sixteen years before the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini gave a speech in Qom to the crowds who had gathered for Ashura, attacking the Shah, Israel and the United States and replying to the accusations the Shah had circulated against him and the clergy. Talking about his own struggle against the Shah, he reminded the crowd of Imam Hossein's battle on behalf of the Shi'is against the forces of the Caliph Yazid. Two days later, Imam Khomeini was arrested and taken to Tehran. Already a popular *marja* (Source of Emulation), with a network of followers throughout Iran, the news of his arrest spread like wildfire. We heard the news the next day, on the feast of Bani Asad.

'The Bani Asad were Arab tribesmen who gathered from the battlefield the headless corpses of Hossein's party on the third day after Ashura. Every year the men of Pishva march manikins of the corpses through the bazaar to the Shrine courtyard. For the last fifty years, I have led the procession chants, and on that morning I sang at the head of the column.

'As the biers entered the courtyard, the crowd wept and raised cries for Hossein and his men. The emotion was building, and when the coffin of Hossein reached the courtyard, the crowd was nearing boiling point. At that moment Haj Hossein Moghadas climbed the prayer steps and shouted to the crowd: "People of Pishva! Today we mourn for two men. We mourn for our martyred Imam Hossein, slaughtered in Karbala by the evil forces of Yazid, and we mourn for Ayatollah Khomeini. Last night in Qom, the Shah and his oppressor troops arrested the Holy Ayatollah and took him to Tehran!" The crowd, filled with Khomeini's followers, erupted in protest and soon, led by pockets of pre-positioned men, started to chant:

"Khomeini, Khomeini, God preserve you!
Death, Death, to your bloodthirsty enemies!"

'The crowd made its way to the central square. We said goodbye to our families and set off. Just outside Pishva, Haj Agha Aldini gathered the people around him: "Men of Pishva, we are on the road to death! At the end of this road lies arrest and imprisonment! Any who wish to do so may return now without dishonour. But old though I am, and weak, I will march with you to Tehran."

'As we marched, people came to join us from the surrounding villages, and as we passed, mothers and wives came up to mud rooftops to wave at the column. Many of the men wore the white shrouds of martyrs; others the black shirts of Muharram. Some carried sticks and stones, but none were armed. As we passed through the town of Varamin, our ranks swelled further, and when we heard that the Shah's army was waiting for us at Baqirabad Bridge we took off our shoes and marched barefoot, like the mourners of Hossein, over the unpaved road.

'About five in the afternoon, we stopped to rest. Four men volunteered to go on ahead to prepare food and lodging in the capital. As I looked back at the mass of men I knew they would never let us reach Tehran, but I marched on. At Baqirabad Bridge we were met by tanks and armed soldiers stationed across the road. Our column drew to a halt. The Shah's commander, Behzadi, came forward and shouted to us to send over a spokesman. Seyed Tabatabaei volunteered, and approached the commander. "Take your people home," said Behzadi.

"They are not my people," he replied, "They are followers of Hossein, and of their *marja*, Ayatollah Khomeini. If we had wanted to go home, we wouldn't have come this far." Behzadi stalked back to his men in a rage, and we stood our ground.

'Then the shooting started. As the first volley ripped through the protesters, Seyed Tabataba'i fell at once, and tens of others along with him. The soldiers fired again, and then the next line took their place. The shooting went on until the road was covered with corpses. I ran into the wheatfields and hid in the dust, listening to the gasping of dying men and watching drops of blood drip from a blade by the roadside. Dusk came quickly, and under the glare of truck headlights the soldiers heaved corpses into their trucks. Keeping to the fields I crept back to Pishva, though I didn't go home. Seven hundred men were arrested that night and taken to prison. Three nights later I returned to my house, but at 2 AM the next morning I was dragged away by police, still in my pyjamas.'

They must have heard this story a thousand times, but the taxi drivers around me sat in enthralled silence. Nearing the end of his story, he broke into song. He sang of Hossein, and the laments of his womenfolk in the desert night. Cracked but powerful, Mr Allahi's voice carried out into the street, where a small crowd had gathered.

'I was pushed into a truck with four others and taken to a police cell. Two cramped nights later, after being in cells with drug dealers and murderers, I was taken to Tehran, where I stood trial and was sentenced to death. I was taken from court to the famous Qasr Prison to await execution. All around me were clerics and political activists with the conviction to die for Imam Khomeini.

'Soon afterwards President Kennedy was assassinated, and the Shah ordered the release of certain political prisoners. My sentence was commuted to ten years' imprisonment. By then I was twenty-seven years old and had been a farm labourer since I was ten. In prison I was surrounded by some of the best religious minds in the country and it was there, at long last, that I received the Quranic training I had missed out on as a boy.'

Mr Allahi drew his account to a close with a flourish of '*Ya* Hossein... *Ya* Ali', echoed by the men around him. Then his grandson peeked round the door to tell him dinner was waiting, and he slipped away.

The events of Baqirabad Bridge were the bloodiest in a string of demonstrations that erupted across Iran, roughly suppressed by the fifth most powerful army in the world. Against the Shah's soldiers, Pishva's barefoot farmers must have looked a pathetic rabble, but as the corpses piled up by the roadside, those protestors won a moral victory that reverberated throughout Iran even as the Shah's soldiers returned to Tehran to report their success to their superiors.

By explicitly linking his political struggle against the Shah to Hossein's own struggle, Ayatollah Khomeini was tapping a deep vein of collective Shi'i faith. Processions to mark the martyrdom of Imam Hossein became the blueprint for the demonstrations that brought down the Shah's regime, and for the round of official demonstrations that still form the ritual core of the Islamic Republic.

2 Just down the road from Mr Allahi lives another septuagenarian who was at Baqirabad that day. While he recovers from heart surgery, Mr Mahsoumzadeh spends his days in drawstring pyjamas, propped up in bed under the gaze of black-and-white photo portraits. Despite his large and accomplished family, there are no wedding or graduation photos on display, only images of the untimely dead. Next to his well-groomed brother, who was shot at Baqirabad Bridge, stands a blown-up image of his nineteen-year-old son, martyred on the southern front in the Iran–Iraq War. Two nephews who also died in the war flank the collection. Above them hangs a smaller image of his second son, who joins us for lunch. 'Eleven years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Iraq earned me a place on the wall,' he jokes.

Mr Mahsoumzadeh grew up working in the family bakery. Though respected as a devout family, the Mahsoumzadehs were poor, and maintained a fairly low profile in the town's hierarchy of farmers. That all changed in 1963 with the death of Hamid and Mr Mahsoumzadeh's own arrest by the Shah's police.

As the last stop on the Silk Road before Shahr-e Rey, Varamin is an ancient town with a spectacular mosque dating back to the thirteenth century. Despite its august history, the decline of farming and migration to nearby Tehran during the Shah's 'White Revolution' left the deeply religious town in poor condition. Before 1963, traditional towns like Varamin and nearby Pishva were already ideologically closer to the clerics in Qom than to the Pahlavi regime, and their blacklisting after 1963 widened the gulf. Persecuted citizens like Mr Mahsoumzadeh and Mr Allahi, who suffered torture and continual harassment by the Shah's intelligence officers, became local ringleaders of Khomeini's revolution, bringing with them the farmers of Varamin.

After the Revolution, towns like Varamin sent a far greater proportion of their men to the front than the rich northern slopes of Tehran. 'Because of the sacrifices my family made, people respect us in this town,' explains Mahsoumzadeh's son. 'We're not political, but we are always asked to help with elections and we play an important role in the mosque.' Favourable contracts and a

monthly stipend, which Mr Mahsoumzadeh receives on behalf of his dead son, helped them expand their textile business to become Varamin's biggest supplier. Illiterate himself, two of Mr Mahsoumzadeh's children earned master's degrees after the Revolution, and three of his grandchildren are studying at university.

His son grumbles about growing corruption in Varamin's town council, and his own struggle to support three children on a teacher's pension of $350 (£175) a month. Shielded from such worries by a devoted family, Mr Mahsoumzadeh has only fond memories of the Revolution to recount to visiting strangers as he gazes up fondly at Khomeini's steely eyebrows and charismatic stare, emblazoned on walls and shopfronts throughout the town; 'Imam Khomeini was the Source of Emulation for most of Varamin,' he says. 'Until the day he died this town loved the Imam like a father.'

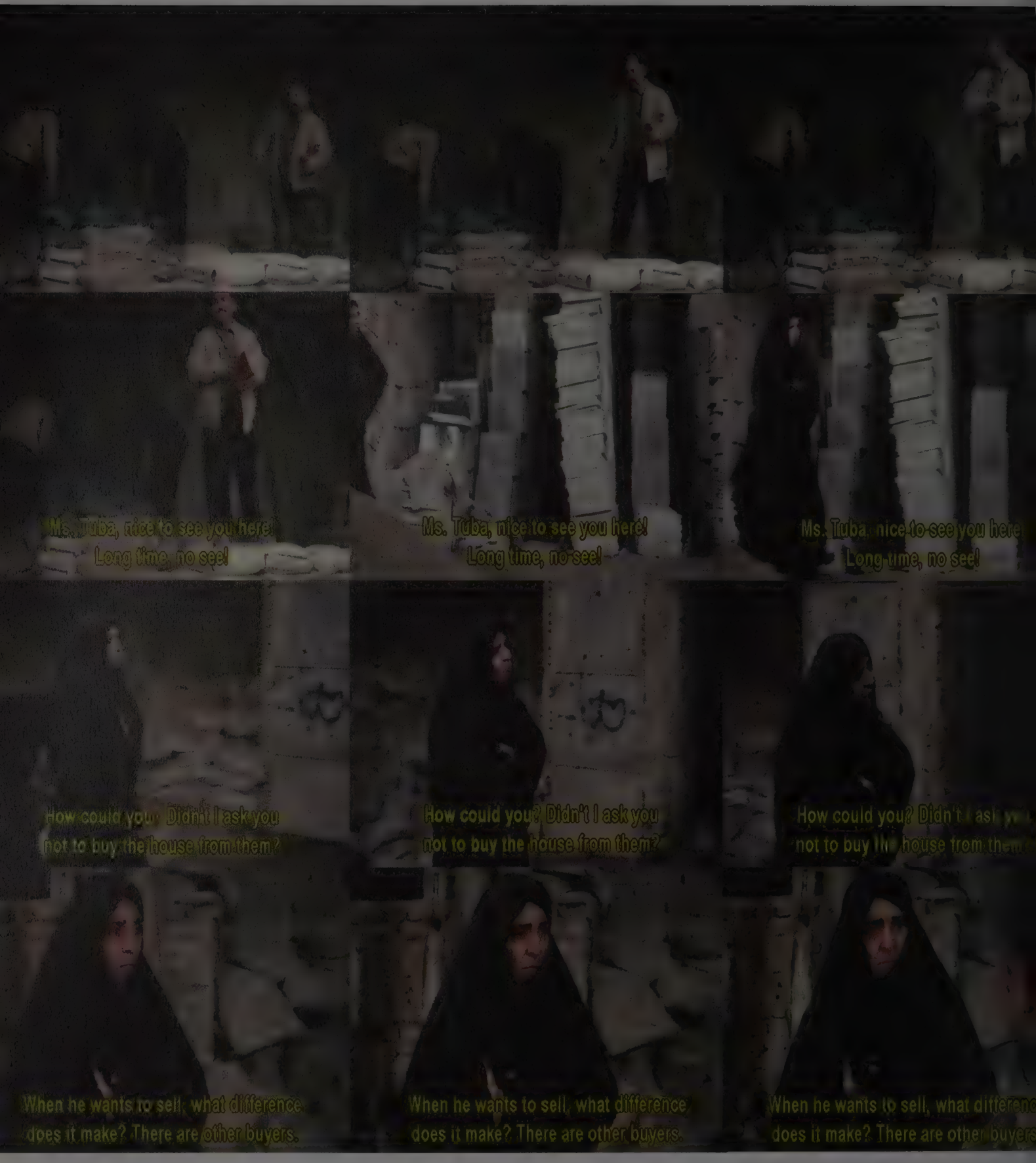
3 Just beyond Baqirabad Bridge where the protestors met their deaths, the road splits around a line of *faux* bronze statues clad in shrouds. An eight-year-old Afghan boy selling oranges from the back of a van couldn't tell me what the statues commemorated, but my taxi driver repeated the story of 1963. He pointed to one statue clutching a broken picture frame. 'There used to be a picture of Khomeini in there. Every night kids would come out and draw funny faces on the picture. After a couple of years the council got tired of cleaning them off and took down the photo.' I asked if the young people of Varamin were more anti-government than their parents. 'No,' he shrugged. 'They're just bored. Lots of the boys around here are *Basiji* but they don't really believe in the system. If the police catch you drinking they let you off if they know you're a *Basij*.'

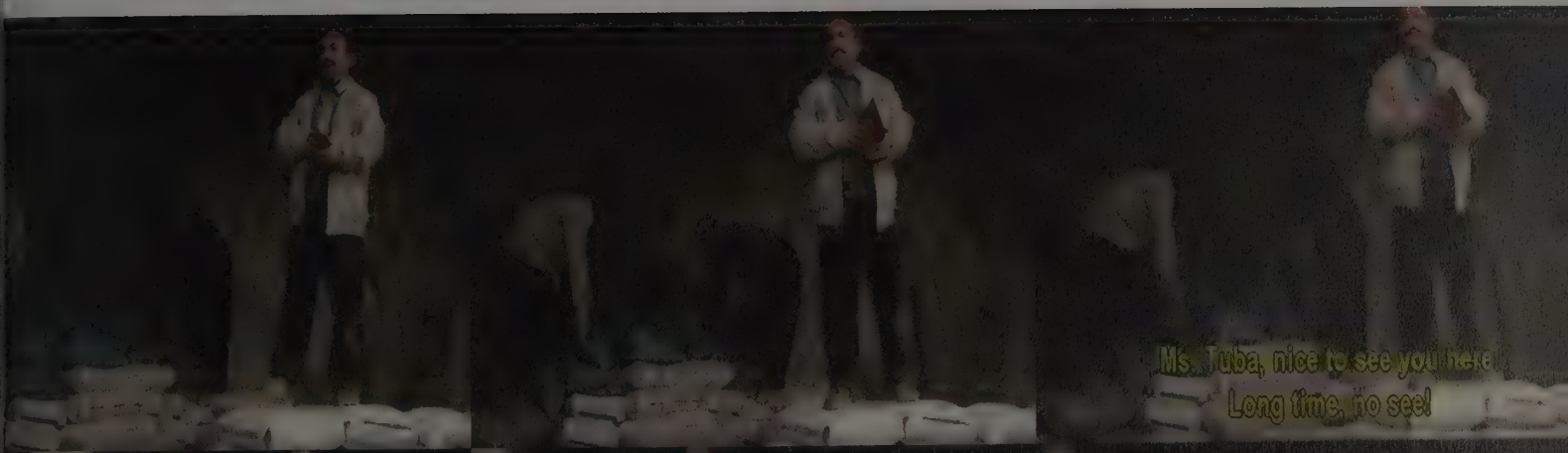
Two months later I returned to Varamin for Arbaein, the fortieth mourning day after the death of Imam Hossein. While I asked a line of old men smoking on a bench for their memories from 1963, the friend who had driven me snapped pictures of an F4 fighter jet from the Iran–Iraq War, pointing skywards at the entrance to the town. As we drove home past Baqirabad's shrouded statues, I repeated with a grin the story of drunken, card-carrying *Basiji*. I was met with a snort of disgust. 'So what? Teenagers join the Boy Scouts and then drink on the weekends; every so often unmarried girls and boys go to bed with each other; unemployed kids take drugs. How is this news? You cling to your American-flag-burning toddlers wearing Mickey Mouse T-shirts, because without them we're just another country and where's the fun in that?'

Chastised, I changed the subject. An addiction to the regime's religious theatre is hard to kick. Most Iranians lost interest years ago, but the clerical drama still has the West's attention and it is unwilling to surrender the stage. When waiting in the wings is the dull business of adequate economic planning, job creation for millions of unemployed young Iranians and equitable social service provision for the poor, why would the regime bring down the curtain on a dramatic play of death and defiance of the West? But while people like me fret about whether or not the Islamic Republic will need to paint over the 'Death to America' slogans before Iran re-establishes diplomatic relations with its former ally, the people on the ground are far ahead of the curve: 'Things come and go: they're just symbols,' says my friend as we pass banners strung up over the road celebrating the Supreme Leader. 'And for Iranians, whatever flags the guys in power are waving, life goes on.'

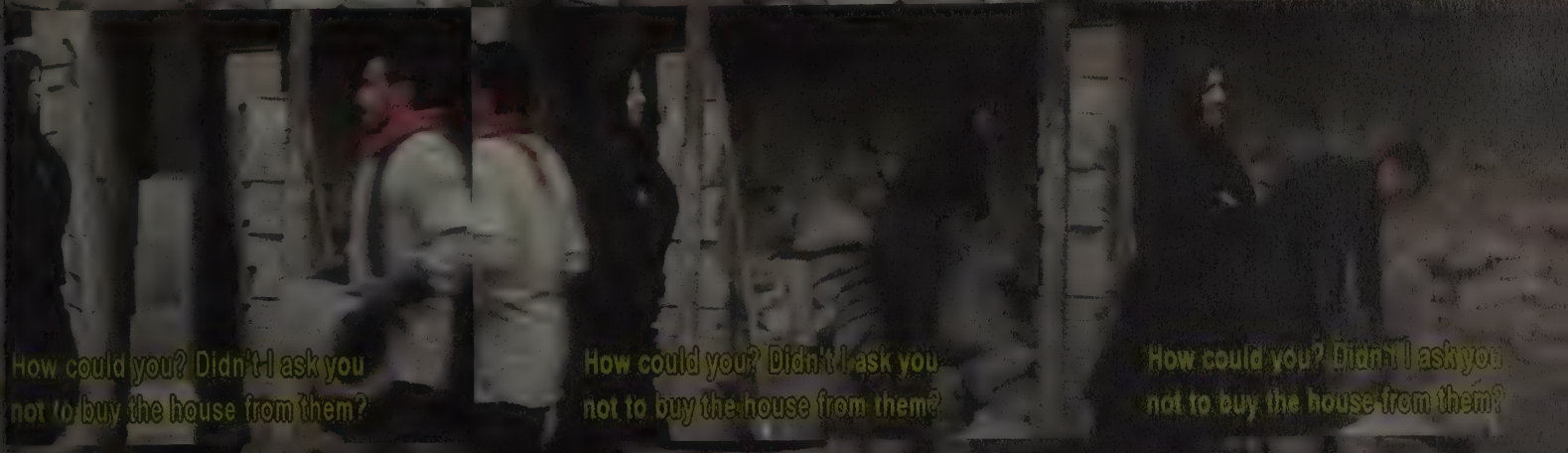
Of course 'Westerners' like me are not the only ones in this relationship blinded by propaganda. After my first month in Tehran I took the Tehran–Istanbul train home for Christmas with a couple of British friends. We found ourselves in a carriage with a long-haired teenager called Ali. He had saved up for months for a ticket to Istanbul 'to sleep with girls', he told us, because his traditional parents wouldn't let him meet them at home. Overjoyed finally that he could talk freely about his desires with 'decadent' Europeans, he slipped a photo from his wallet of a very young Thai 'girlfriend' he had picked up on a trip the previous summer. As this lonely young man opened up to us, he started to share his more explicit fantasies — 'You know, like they do in America.' I should have taken time to sit with him and explain that despite what he'd heard on Iranian state radio and television, or at Friday prayers, not all Westerners are wells of sexual perversion. But we just called the train guard and moved compartment.

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**

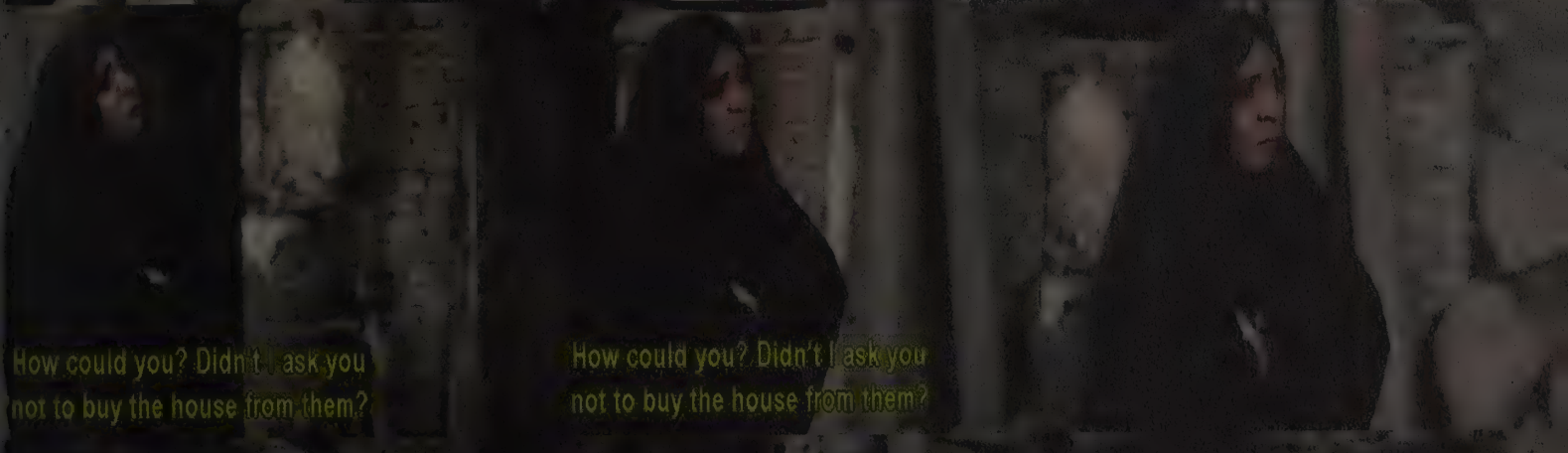




Ms. Tuba, nice to see you here.
Long time, no see!



How could you? Didn't I ask you not to buy the house from them?



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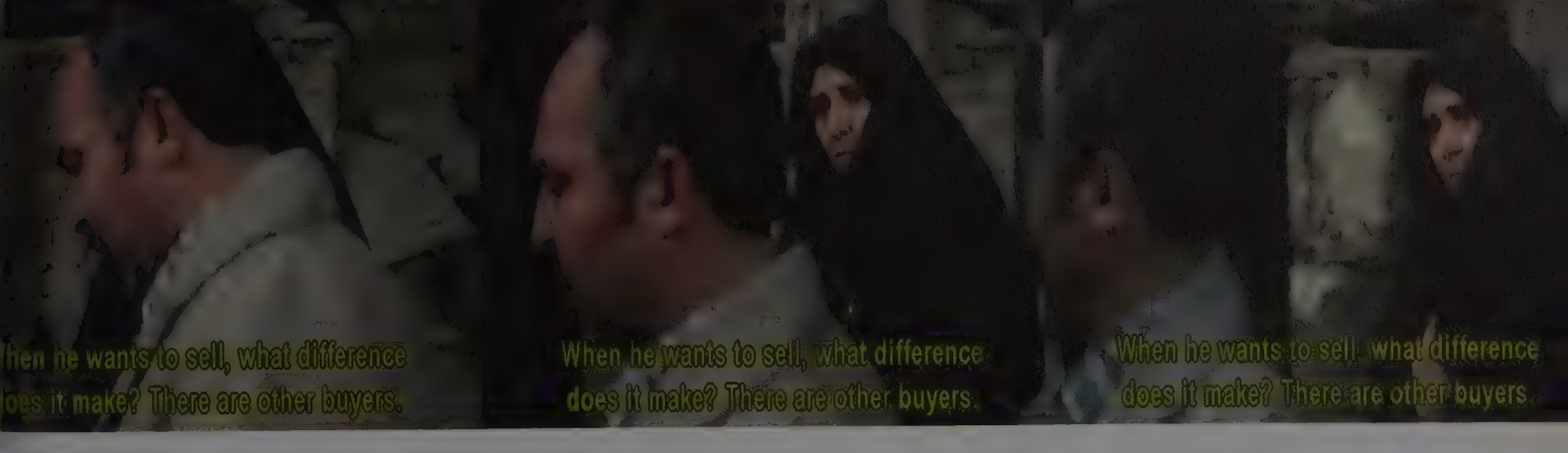
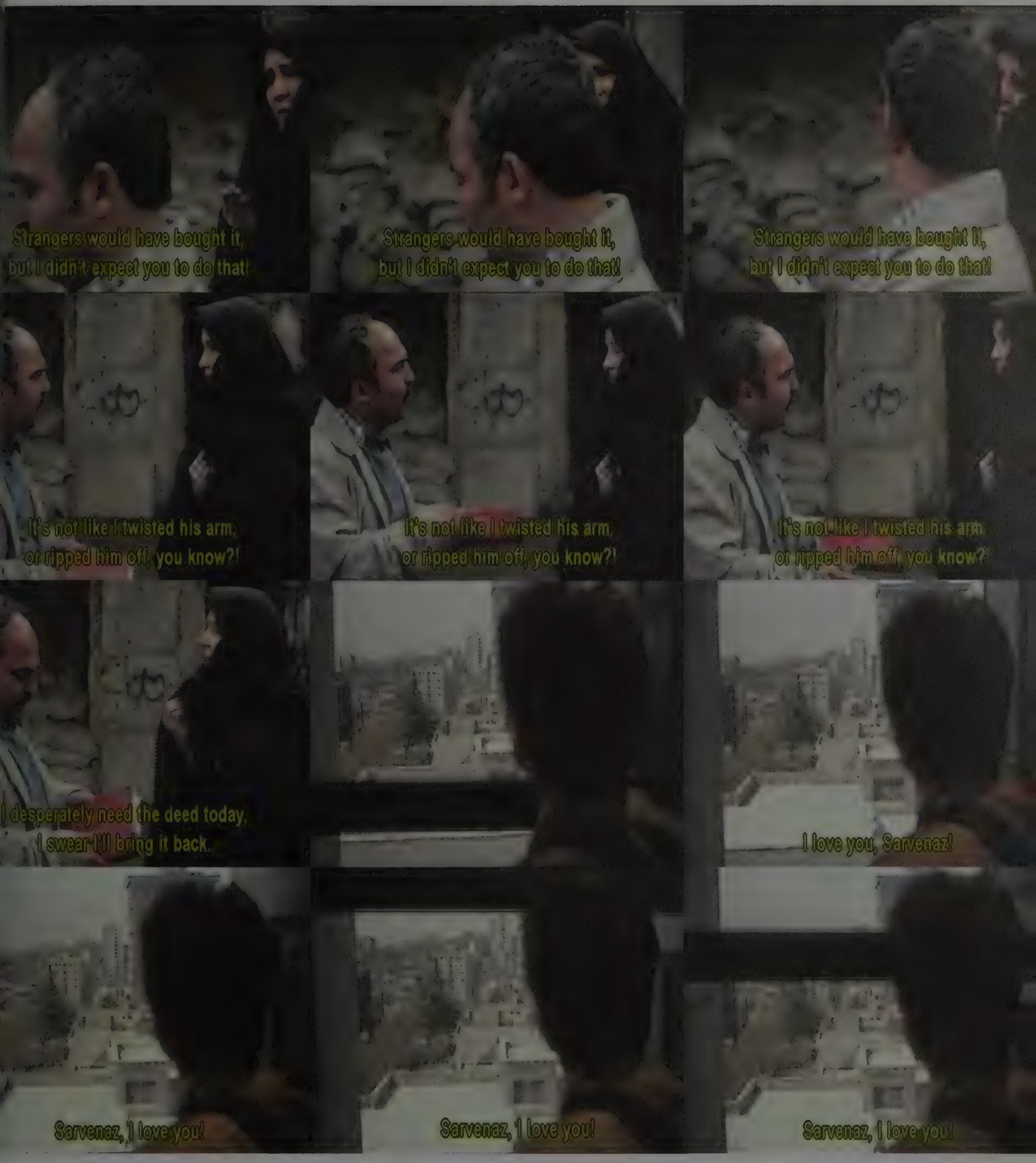
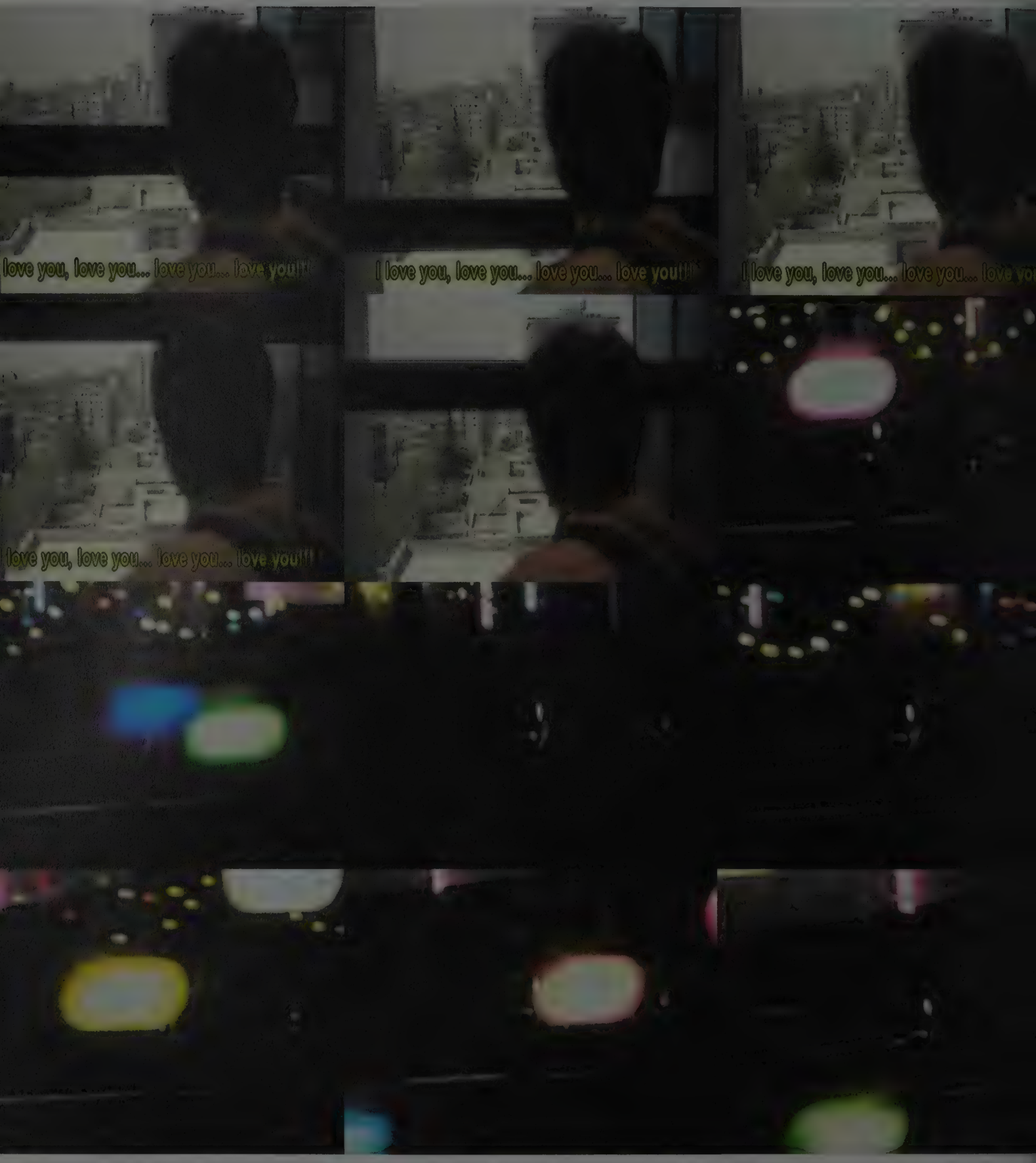


When he wants to sell, what difference does it make? There are other buyers.

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**


Strangers would have bought it,
but I didn't expect you to do that!
Strangers would have bought it,
but I didn't expect you to do that!
Strangers would have bought it,
but I didn't expect you to do that!
It's not like I twisted his arm,
or ripped him off, you know?!
It's not like I twisted his arm,
or ripped him off, you know?!
It's not like I twisted his arm,
or ripped him off, you know?!
I desperately need the deed today,
I swear I'll bring it back.
I love you, Sarvenaz!
Sarvenaz, I love you!
Sarvenaz, I love you!
Sarvenaz, I love you!

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**



you, love you... love you... love you!"
I love you, love you... love you... love you!"
I love you, love you... love you... love you!"

The high schools, mosques and cultural centres in Naziabad, a working-class area in southern Tehran, were active in the 1979 Revolution. Nearly twenty years later, the district helped to bring the moderate President Mohammad Khatami to power and has been home to dissidents like Akbar Ganji.[1]

A Monograph on Naziabad and Its Inhabitants

A working-class neighbourhood that is a bastion of intellectuals

1 The article 'The Naziabadis' by Mohammad Ghouchani, published in the high-circulation daily *Hamshahri,* may also have done much to draw attention to the area, because the paper was banned for several days after the article was published. It was later included in a collection of articles by Ghouchani, editor-in-chief of one of Iran's most important dailies, *Shargh,* and later *Ham-Mihan.* Akbar Ganji, a former Revolutionary Guard who went on to work for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, grew disillusioned with the regime and became an investigative journalist.

The name of every area in Tehran, like any other city, has a story and a history behind it. Not many people are likely to have given much thought to the reason behind Naziabad's name. It is not a very old district; during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, it consisted of nothing but farmland south of Tehran. According to one account, the name is connected to Germany's Nazi Party and the Second World War. A British journalist writes: 'In order to pursue espionage plans, the head of the German espionage service in Islamic countries visited Iran many times. Dr Grobba, who was in charge of German propaganda in the Middle East, was one of the politicians who was particularly interested in Iran; an interest that was brought to bear via the German Club in Tehran which was known as the Brown House, a suitable place for Gestapo men to make contact with their agents in Iran. All this may have best manifested itself in the vast aggregate of buildings that was to have been built in the form of that country's military headquarters in Tehran, in an area named Naziabad after the Nazi Party.'[2]

Another account has it that, since the lands in this vicinity belonged to Naazi, Nassereddin Shah's wife, the area was named 'Naaziabad'.

Naziabad as it exists today was built in the 1960s on the edges of southern Tehran. With the city's growth over four decades, it has become a part of Tehran's vast expanse. The emergence of marginal urban areas in Iran can be ascribed to migration from villages to cities. The migration itself began with the process of industrialisation and the concentration of resources, facilities and jobs in cities plus deprivation in the countryside. The flood of migrating people and the unchecked expansion of the city led the government to ban construction outside Tehran's limits. However, construction persisted, and places like Afsarieh, Aliabad, Khak-e Sefid, Mesgarabad, Cheshmeh-Ali, Moshirieh and Majidieh continued to spring up outside city limits. Mostly inhabited by migrants, labourers and low-ranking white-collar workers, these places had high unemployment.

Naziabad was considered within and just on the edge of the city limits, so the rules governing urban construction were respected there. It was a poor area, but its inhabitants enjoyed a slightly better standard of living than those residing in the adjacent neighbourhoods of Khazaneh and Aliabadi because of its modern industries. The Chaharsad-Dastgah (400 Units) area on the periphery of Naziabad was a residential complex built for the employees of a textile plant and the customs

2 Waverly Root, *The Secret History of the War, Vol. 1* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945) pp. 271–3.

office. Hezar-Dastgah (1,000 Units) was another complex, for workers. (In an attempt to stem the growth of communism, capitalist entrepreneurs opted to fulfill the minimum needs of their factory workers. This prescription was followed in other Third World countries, thought to be more susceptible to communist revolutions.)

In Naziabad, the communist *Tudeh* Party[3] (and later the *Fada'i-ye Khalq* guerrilla organisation[4]) had many followers, especially in the glassware and textile plants. During a several-day-long strike at the textile plant, said to have been organised by *Tudeh* Party members, strikers' families and their supporters threw food in through the factory's windows for the men as army forces cordoned off the surrounding area. The *Tudeh* Party was also influential among university students. (The student who lived next door to us was, in fact, a *Tudeh* supporter.)

Educational institutions Naziabad's schools included Fateh High School, Elahi High School and Adl High School. The last, adjacent to and virtually twinned with (if more academically oriented than) Elahi, had its name changed to Martyr Fatemi after the 1979 Revolution: Fatemi, a pupil at Adl, was martyred in a demonstration leading up to the Revolution.

After 1979, Fateh High School, just opposite the al-Rasul mosque, was one of most political schools in southern Tehran. Opposition and left-wing groups tended to have the upper hand there. Supporters of communist groups like *Peykar* and the *Fada'i-ye Khalq*, along with other groups such as the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* and *Arman-e Mostaz'afein*[5] used to display and sell their books and leaflets on the pavement in front of the school. As political clashes with supporters of the Islamic Republic escalated in 1980, and with the political assassinations of June 1981, these activities came to a halt and went underground.

After the Revolution, Ahmad Hajjarian, the younger brother of Sa'id Hajjarian,[6] became the headmaster of Adl High School. He did not become the best-known member of his family because he liked to teach and was more interested in education. Later on, he became one of the founders of some of the most successful private schools in Tehran. However, even after 1979, it was Elahi that continued to have a fairly political and intellectual-religious orientation. Although different groups went there, they never came to blows.

The Farah Educational Centre, one of the city's biggest and most modern schools, was also part of Naziabad's school system. It offered education from nursery and primary levels to junior high and high school. It also had a congregation hall, sports facilities and laboratory equipment. The centre's director was Fariba Diba, Queen Farah's mother; however, more importantly the centre was run by a woman called Mrs Vosugh. The Farah was the first school in southern Tehran to be managed by a woman who did not wear the *hejab*. It was also southern Tehran's first coeducational school, inaugurated four years before the Revolution. There were predictions that it would not be enthusiastically received, or that it would even be opposed because of religious sensitivities and suspicions. In its early days, the mosques advised parents against sending their children there on grounds that coeducation was a conspiracy aimed at corrupting the young. But the Farah used to take outstanding pupils, and unlike other schools that only admitted children from their immediate neighbourhoods, the centre drew its student body from all over the city, including the well-to-do suburbs of northern Tehran.

In 1978, when Tehran's schools were in the throes of revolutionary disturbances (especially in the south, and headed by Elahi), the Farah was calm. Although it joined the revolutionary process later than other schools, the number of protests there attracted a lot of attention. The centre was located somewhere between Naziabad and Yaqchiabad, a more deprived district outside city limits. After the Revolution, the centre's name was changed to the Dr Ali Shariati Educational Centre, after the combatant and democratic ideologue of the Islamic Revolution whose death in 1978 proved a factor in the revolutionary convulsion of the time (although his teachings were prohibited for quite some time after the establishment of the Islamic Republic).

3 *Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Iran* ('Party of the Masses of Iran'), founded in 1941, had close relations with the Soviet Union. 4 *Fada'i-ye Khalq-eh Iran* (literally, 'Those who Die for the Iranian People') was an armed Marxist guerilla group formed in the late 1960s. 5 *Peykar* ('Struggle') was a splinter group of Marxist-Maoists, which in the 1970s separated from the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, a militant political party that advocates the overthrowing of the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Arman-e Mostaz'afein*, its splinter faction, followed the ideas of Dr Ali Shariati. 6 Sa'id Hajjarian, often described as the theoretician of the reform movement, was President Khatami's political adviser in 1997. He resigned the next year to stand in the Islamic Republic's first local council elections. In March 2000 he was shot at short range in front of the Tehran City Council building. He survived, but has been more or less wheelchair-bound since, and has speech impediments. Hajjarian was also the director of one of the most daring reformist dailies, *Sobh-e Emrooz*, in the heyday of the reformist press under Khatami. The paper was banned in April 2000.

Elahi High School was Naziabad's most political educational establishment, and many of Naziabad's and Aliabad's activists went to school there, including Sa'id Hajjarian; Abbas Abdi;[7] Kamran Fani;[8] Ja'far Zaker; and the writer Mohammad Esfandiari. I was among the young political and religious activists of Aliabad, along with the cleric and translator Seyed Reza Razmgir, who later changed his name to Hosseini-Amin; the researcher Hossein Alizadeh; and Hassan Robati, once district mayor in various parts of Tehran. But we didn't all attend the school at the same time; some were older and studied in earlier years, and some were younger and studied later on — proof that Elahi High School had a political tradition and produced politicised students over a period of many years.

The school's headmaster was Mr Saha'i, Ayatollah Emami-Kashani's son-in-law. Emami-Kashani was not a well-known cleric then; that would happen after the Revolution. But he supported Ayatollah Khomeini and Mr Saha'i was like-minded. In view of the great danger posed by SAVAK, Mr Saha'i did not air his views in public, but served as a protective umbrella for revolutionary and religious people.

Among the school's teachers, too, there were political activists of various persuasions. Mr Mamghani, who taught statistics, had *Tudeh* or communist tendencies. Mr Mashayekhi (Daneshju) belonged to the Hojjatiyeh Society.[9] Mr Ebrahimi was a communist and a member of the *Fada'i-ye Khalq* (apparently he was executed after the Revolution). Mr Gudarzi was a defender of the monarchy and the status quo. He used to say that the US and Britain were trying to instigate a revolution in Iran to prevent the country from becoming a great civilisation. In the early days of the Revolution, he switched over to the *Mojahedin* national movement because his brother belonged to it. Abbas Abdi and Ali Hajjarian were among the school's last young teachers who taught while still university students.

Some of Elahi's pupils joined opposition groups after the Revolution, and were jailed. They were all political activists or intellectuals, though some of them later opted for a different course and remained unknown; thus only a few Naziabadi figures became famous. The Marxist writer Mostafa Sho'aian, for his part, used to teach at Naziabad's 25 Shahrivar Arts Academy.

Surrounding areas Aliabad was also outside city limits, midway between Khazaneh and Naziabad. Many of its children used to attend schools in Naziabad, especially from junior high school onwards, because at the time there were no high schools in Aliabad. Surrounded by wheat and summer crops, farms and brick burners, Aliabad had no paved roads. A number of factories produced such things as cookers, aluminium pots and pans, copper wire, blankets and glassware, surrounded by the factory workers who lived there. The young activists of Aliabad and Naziabad used to mix in Naziabad's high schools and mosques. Their close ties (especially once Naziabad and Aliabad expanded into each other) meant that they later became known as the 'Naziabadis'. During this period, three focal points of activism in southern Tehran can be identified: Khazaneh, Aliabad and Naziabad. The activities of the kids in the Darvazeh Qaz and Gowd-Neshin areas, too, were intertwined with those of the kids in Khazaneh. Aliabad was midway between the two other areas and, in a way, had a presence in both, but as Naziabad had more schools and mosques, their presence in that district was more pronounced.

Khazaneh was big enough to have one cinema, called Shahrokh Cinema, which was considered third-rate. Naziabad had Shahla Cinema, which was second-rate. There was also Shargh Cinema on Aramgah Avenue near Naziabad, also second-rate. All three cinemas were closed down after the Revolution. Twenty-seven years later, there is still no cinema in these areas.

Naziabad was on the main road from Tehran to Shahr-e Rey. It was, in fact, on the route from Tehran to Qom and the south of the country, and this gave it a special distinction.

7 One of the first students to occupy the US embassy in Tehran in 1980, Abbas Abdi later became critical of the Islamic Republic. 8 Writer, researcher and librarian of the National Library of Iran, Kamran Fani is one of the authors of the *Iranian Encyclopedia*. 9 The Hojjatiyeh Society was an anti-Baha'i organisation endorsed by leading clerics, and cooperated closely with SAVAK. Its supporters produced anti-Baha'i pamphlets, denounced Baha'is to the authorities and disrupted Baha'i gatherings.

Clergy and mosques The clerics of the mosques of Aliabad, Khazaneh and Naziabad all had similar views, and they were all united in their opposition to Dr Shariati. But the al-Rasul mosque in Naziabad was bigger, more modern and better equipped, and more centrally located. In those days, when the first sparks of revolution had been lit (but no one knew yet that a big revolution was on the way), some of Naziabad's religious students like Mehrpour and Rahim Ebadi and Ja'far Zaker, and of whom Kamran Fani was the most prominent, founded the Naziabad Cultural Society at the al-Rasul mosque. The society used to hold boost-up classes in various subjects for high school students. These were very well-received, and used to draw students from outside Naziabad too.

In addition to classes on academic subjects, the society's founders also established a class on Islamic teachings, which allowed them to pursue their political ideological aims within that framework without provoking political sensitivities. This meant that, after the Revolution, the members of the society served as readymade cadres who could take over the Education Department's District 16 (which embraced Naziabad and Aliabad), purge the pre-Revolution forces and absorb and employ teachers who were supporters of the Revolution. The area was seen as the Education Department's most successful area in the early days of the Revolution. In effect, the Naziabad Cultural Society also turned al-Rasul into a centre of a different kind of activity in the area. In the early revolutionary days, the mosque's congregational prayer leader was assassinated by the *Forghan* group.[10] The incident both revealed and elevated the mosque's centrality.

In Naziabad, a group of young people used to organise revolutionary activities from al-Rasul. Mr Rezakhani would run off leaflets. Later he became deputy minister for supplies at the Revolutionary Guards Ministry. He and another man set up a printing press in al-Rasul soon after the Revolution.

The Fotuhi brothers were two other activists. One of them used to give lessons on the *Nahj al-Balagha*.[11] Davud Karimi was involved in the military wing. He devised home-made bombs and established the *Fajr-e Eslam* group. He later became the Revolutionary Guards' commander for Tehran and, during the war, he was commander of operations on the western front. He also worked for a while as the head of the country's anti-drugs HQ, combating armed international smugglers. Towards the end of the first decade after the Revolution, Karimi was detained for several weeks because of his independent, pro-freedom tendencies. He retreated to his blacksmith's workshop in Salehabad, one of the southern most and most deprived areas of Tehran, and lived there in isolation until dying in 2005 from war-related illnesses.

Engineer Ata'i and his wife (also an engineer) had set up an Islamic publicity office before the 1979 victory, and used to run classes. Ata'i was later given cultural responsibilities in the Revolutionary Guards. In the period after Ayatollah Khomeini's demise, he worked in Ayatollah Khamenei's office. Sani'khani was one of al-Rasul's political activists who was given numerous responsibilities in the Guards after the Revolution.

Ja'far Zaker had a combatant, political family. One of his brothers was killed in the executions of the 1980s. His mother was jailed, and then executed because of her persistent, strongly-worded protests. Zaker himself was one of the first members of the Revolutionary Guards, in charge of the Guards' war publicity. He was killed defending the Revolution and the Islamic Republic in the Mersad operations (against the extensive attack launched by the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* army, with the support of the Iraqi army, in July 1988). His brother, who was a member of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq's* central council and who imagined that they would be marching to Tehran to take power thanks to their attack, was killed on the other side. The Mohammadi-Ardahali brothers ranked among the long-standing national and religious activists before the Revolution. Sa'id Hajjarian and his brothers, too, were among the area's political movers and shakers. They were all university students, and had a good social standing in the area.

The social class of the majority of the inhabitants of southern Tehran provided fertile ground for communist sympathies, and many young people were drawn to anti-capitalist and pro-underclass slogans because they understood deprivation. In the face of this pro-left tendency, young people who were religiously inclined knew that if they opted for reactionary stances, they would lose the battle even before it had begun. Hence they needed to adopt a radical and progressive stance to counter the prevalent Marxist trend. This was why the young, religious people of southern Tehran were drawn to Shariati's ideas, which fulfilled this need. This is the key to the fact that there are no right-wingers among the figures who emerged from this area. The right-wing figures generally fell into a higher age group, and they mostly hailed from areas that were closer to the middle and upper classes.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

10 The *Forghan* terrorist group assassinated Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, scholar, cleric, lecturer and politician. The anniversary of his death is commemorated on May 2, National Teachers' Day. 11 *Nahj al-Balagha* ('Peak of Eloquence' in Arabic) is a famous collection of sermons and letters attributed to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, close companion, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad.

Photo Essay and Text **Omid Salehi**

After the first prayers of the day, Haj Amjad exercises.

Private Life of a Cleric

A photographer documents a religious community and overcomes his suspicion of faith

I had always wanted to work on a photo essay about the everyday life of an Islamic cleric, because there is a great distance between their lives and those of the general public. They always speak of 'saving humanity', and this interested me. Clerics throughout Iran's history have always had a political influence. I wanted to see them in their ordinary lives.

I was introduced to Haj Amjad by a religious friend of mine. Haj Amjad studied Islamic morality and ethics for fifteen years under Ayatollah Ghazi and Ayatollah Behjat, two notable professors. He is originally from Kermanshah, where he served as the imam for Friday prayers for several years. His students attribute to him supernatural and mystical powers. Some claim to have had out-of-body experiences during his prayers. They report having 'travelled' to holy sites such as Karbala and Mashad to pray, in a practice known as *tarigh alarze*. Haj Amjad teaches lessons in Islamic morality to his *talebs* (students) as well as teaching them about the lives and teachings of the Imams. He enjoys a very close relationship with his students, and many of them tell me that their initial attraction to his lessons was due to his friendly and approachable attitude. He can connect with people very easily, and is able to talk to everyone. He has positively influenced many people, from little children to troubled individuals who have changed their lives under his guidance.

When I first travelled to meet Haj Amjad, I took some of my other photos and reports with me to show him. I explained that I was trying to record contemporary life in Iran. I told him that I usually chose a social group to follow and document over a period of six months to a year. Haj Amjad quickly warmed to the idea and invited me to attend morning prayers the following day at Imam Khomeini School. The school was a very old mosque in which the *talebs* were introduced to such subjects as computer studies and English. I turned up in a bright red T-shirt and spent the day following Haj Amjad everywhere. He was very laid-back, and never questioned what I was doing. His students, however, perhaps attempting to impress him, were more inquisitive: 'Why are you wearing a red T-shirt? Why are you photographing our teacher? Why don't you grow a beard?' Eventually Haj Amjad took it upon himself to explain my presence at the beginning of each session: 'Don't worry about Omid, I have seen *sedaghat* (truthfulness) in him. He is free to do as he pleases; he won't cause any problems.' I always tried to be as respectful as possible to the group. I did not want to be an unwelcome guest. I always stayed completely silent, and did not jump around the place like news photographers tend to do. I wanted them to understand that I had only come to observe their way of life. I was free to photograph whatever I wanted, but in my work I have always practised a policy of never crossing what I believe to be the moral limits of a situation. The intimate nature of my relationship with my subjects stems from the fact that they can understand that I do not wish to invade their private borders and have no intention of doing so. I first live with them and learn to enjoy being with them as a friend. I never exploit people's negative aspects or undermine them. I am simply interested in witnessing their lives, not judging them. Maybe people get different impressions from my photos. At first the constant prayer sessions every morning, afternoon and evening were tedious, but after a while, as everyone grew more accustomed to my coming and going, I was able to arrive late or leave if nothing was happening. I began to spend so much time with Haj Amjad that the students became curious. They thought they could learn more about him through me and were particularly interested in whether I could reveal any unflattering moments that would show him to be flawed in some way. On one occasion, Haji gave me a 200-*toman* note. Although the monetary value is low, this act surprised me and I did not immediately understand its significance. Later the students told me how lucky I was. Haji must really like me a lot, they said: the money was a blessing that would bring me good fortune. In following Haj Amjad everywhere he went, I became the envy of many of his students. I, in turn, found their attraction to him fascinating.

The *talebs* were mostly simple people from small villages in rural areas, and many had religious backgrounds. Very often the students had been encouraged to take up religious studies by a member of their family or a family friend who was already a cleric. Under an Islamic government, it is seen as a very respectable way of life, and the students are happy to live with others who share their views. They want people to see and respect them, as they believe they have found the path to peace and to becoming a better human being. They take pleasure in extolling the virtues of the religious life to others. I feel very privileged to have stepped into the private life of a cleric. I have even seen Haj Amjad sleeping. While he sleeps his students gather around him, believing his breath will bring them grace. They even pour their tea into Haji's cup and drink it, believing it to be blessed. I tried to make my presence as inobtrusive as possible. However, I remember once when Haji asked everyone to be quiet and to simply think. While everyone sat there, meditating, I moved amongst them taking photos. The clicks of my shutter echoed through the mosque, breaking the silence. I will never forget that moment, the beautiful sound of my camera's shutter as it recorded the silence of life.

Translated from Farsi by Hengameh Golestan

Even when he's asleep, Haj Amjad's students draw near to him to be close to his special powers.

Haj Amjad is respected and revered in his community.

A moment of solitude and prayer for a man who is rarely left alone.

A show of respect: a believer kisses the cleric's hand.

The cleric contemplates his daughters' playtime.

Haj Amjad delivers the Friday sermon in the mosque.

At the seminary, his sermons are videotaped for posterity.

Haj Amjad, a charismatic cleric, takes a much-needed break.

In his company, lamentation and prayer
fills the air.

Students and adherents surround Haj Amjad for blessing and instruction.

In Iran, there are clerical schools training only women. They are taught differently than men. Some of the women go to school to learn Quranic legal argumentation to defend themselves against their husbands and brothers; others will end up preaching or leading religious groups. Very few will attain the highest religious rank, *ijtihad* — the ability to interpret religious law.

Women's Clerical Schools

Inside one of the 199 seminaries for women

I know I'll lose the way. I put my car keys in my handbag and call a taxi. Forty-five minutes later, the taxi stops in one of Tehran's southernmost streets, at the turning of a narrow and winding alleyway. I get out. I adjust my full head-and-neck covering to make sure it hides all my hair and I enter the alleyway. It's too narrow to allow in any vehicles other than motorcycles. Midway down the alleyway, there's a green door, my destination — one of 199 seminaries in Iran that train women. I enter.

The day before, when I asked the seminary's director whether I needed to wear a *chador*, she said: 'The important thing isn't a *chador* but to respect the *hejab*.' But, today, despite my head-and-neck covering, a long *manteau* and thick tights, my *hejab* is still found lacking. A young girl stares at me and says: 'So you don't believe in God?' Being confronted with this question means facing the charge of apostasy, which carries the death sentence in Islam.

I can't believe that a teenage seminary student so easily allows herself to comment on my beliefs, an observation based only on my pallid fingernail polish. To her mind, the fact that I wear it means I don't pray; not praying means I don't perform my religious duties; not performing my religious duties means I don't believe in God. This is the reasoning of an eighteen-year-old first-year seminary student who has had only courses in Arabic literature and a bit of Islamic history so far.

'Don't take it to heart, she's still very young,' the middle-aged seminary's director consoles me, adding: 'Many of the young women who come to study here tend to be a bit radical because they aren't well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence. But, after a few years, as their learning grows, they become moderate.'

My conversations with other students in the seminary's three-storey building confirm the director's remarks. These are women and girls similar to the ones I see on the streets of Tehran. Behind the seminary walls, they move around freely without *chadors*, wearing *manteaus* and head-and-neck coverings or just scarves. They chat and sometimes exchange jokes, making them appear to me increasingly like ordinary women.

Nasrin agrees to speak to me. She invites me to sit on the ground near a big, wooden bookcase. In the large room known as the library, the only available chairs are in front of the four switched-off computers. Of course, the librarian is sitting at her own desk, but students borrowing books sit on the floor to read them. Nasrin, twenty-eight, has a three-year-old daughter. She will graduate from the women's seminary next year, and she regrets not doing enough to reap maximum benefit from her four years there. 'That's always the way. When you have something, you don't value it.'

She started her seminary studies after marrying. 'I was tired of sitting in the house and just doing housework. And I wasn't motivated to go to university. My husband, who works in the security department of one of the state bodies, encouraged me.'

In order to be accepted into one of Tehran's twenty seminaries, women under the age of twenty-five with a high school diploma must sit an entrance exam. Some seminaries also take into account the applicant's average mark in the national diploma exams. Four-year seminary studies begin with Arabic language studies. Students are also taught the principles of ethics, logic, theology and oratory. To obtain the equivalent of a BA, they are also required to take courses in Persian literature and basic computer skills.

Although female seminary students obtain the same qualification as men, the way they are taught is very different. In men's seminaries, students attend the classes of a number of teachers, and then each individual student has the freedom to choose his own teacher. Women students aren't given this choice. At the same time, they aren't allowed to see their teacher's face. In class, a curtain is drawn, which separates students from the teacher. Nor are they allowed to ask their teacher any questions outside the classroom.

This barrier is supposed to prevent women students and their male teacher from having non-academic relations. But I've heard it is not altogether effective; six years earlier, one of the teachers was charged with having illegitimate relations with the students in one of his classes — all fourteen of them.

Nasrin disagrees, and says with utmost seriousness: 'They've made all these things up to discredit seminaries. It's impossible for such a thing to occur in this holy atmosphere. Of course, some of the women don't deserve to be here. Last year, a seminarian arrived here whose intentions were rapidly exposed by God and she was expelled as God willed it. She was always talking about the courses she'd taken outside Iran and she used to say that, in order to engage in practical work, she'd stay up all night and work with her male classmates on the orders of their teacher. She kept saying sinful things like this until she was expelled.'

'Every one of the teachers enjoys special respect,' emphasises Nasrin. 'And in view of their faith and learning, it's impossible for them to commit a forbidden act.' Her tone reminds me of Fatemeh, the teenager who considered me an apostate: decisive and firm, without the slightest room for error.

A former teacher at one of the women's seminaries explains this aspect of the students' behaviour: 'Some of the precepts have to be obeyed blindly. That is to say, if you don't understand the philosophy behind the precept, don't ask, because your understanding is deficient. So you have to obey unquestioningly! In such cases, Muslims have to act on these precepts without

asking why; otherwise, they're sinners. The teaching of these precepts and the insistence that they are unarguable makes some seminarians look at everything that happens around them in this light.'

A smile fills Nasrin's face when I ask her about her daughter: 'Studying at the seminary has changed many things in my life. Before, I was looking for scientific answers for my family, but now I find the answers to all my questions in Islam. For example, when I read that Imam Ali used to take part in the battles against infidels on the strength of milk and dates alone, I always make milk and dates the main part of my daughter's diet. Even on many of the practices of private relationships, Islam has presented answers for a better life.' (She is referring to the famous book *Halyat al-Muttaqeen* by the influential seventeenth-century cleric Allamah al-Majlesi which contains precise sexual instructions.)

Seminary feminism Nasrin is one of the few married students at the seminary. Most of them are young women gazing at the future. I speak to Maryam, who turned to seminary studies after graduating from university. Couldn't she have found a suitable job with a degree in food industries?

With her eyes pinned to the carpet and her hands playing with her sleeves, she replies: 'The university environment wasn't what I'd been looking for. I learned lots of things about my academic subject there, but no one taught me how to live. I've come here to learn how to live, how to reason and argue, and how to defend my rights.'

An hour later, when she decides she can trust me a little more, she tells me how her three religious brothers used to torment her when she was living at home, and how they used to humiliate her throughout her years at university. But now, two years into her seminary studies, she can answer their put-downs with Quranic arguments.

Maryam also tells me about a friend who'd turned to seminary studies in order to be able to stand up to her husband. Nafiseh, who'd married a religious man four years earlier, continues her studies despite having a one-year-old son, so that she can reason with her husband and not be 'outwitted in her family life', as she puts it. Maryam says: 'I think her husband was keen that they should have a baby to stop her studying. But Nafiseh has managed so far. She is doing her housework, taking care of the baby and studying.'

Ijtihad: An unattainable future Both Maryam and Nasrin still don't have any thoughts on continuing their studies. Nasrin believes that time will determine what path she'll follow. However, a former seminary teacher who asks not to be named observes: 'The traditional view that prevails over seminaries holds that women cannot attain the highest religious rank or *ijtihad* (the ability to form and pronounce reasoned opinions on religious law), unless a woman can pursue advanced studies with a close member of her family, such as her father.' The teacher believes that the philosophy behind this thinking lies in a remark made by Imam Ali in the famous collection of his speeches and sermons, the *Nahj al-Balagha* — that women are deficient in reasoning, utility and faith.

But Fatemeh, who graduated from the seminary last year and has come to use the resources in the library, says: 'Well, seminaries are a part of our traditional society. Throughout the time I was studying at the seminary, I felt like I was in the lesser chamber of the *marja'iyat* (position of senior Shi'i clerics who are qualified in *ijtihad* and can be emulated by ordinary Shi'is in their religious practices). Everything is different for women; the lessons, the teachers, the manner in which the classes are held. If you think about it you'll see that, despite the large number of graduates, the management of the big women's seminaries is still in the hands of men. This amounts to a huge lesser chamber filled with thousands of women.'

Another student in the seminary adds: 'In a seminary, the training is in three stages: introductory, primary and advanced. In all women's seminaries, the training stops at the advanced stage; the only women who can pass it are those who either study with a close relative or use the audiotapes of teachers, without attending their classes.' She doesn't add that these conditions make it so difficult that, in the history of Islam, women who've been able to practise *ijtihad* number fewer than the fingers of one hand. But when I ask her about women and *ijtihad*, she concludes: '*Ijtihad* is a very high position. It's an unattainable dream for me. I have to reach such a level of learning and faith as to be able to issue *fatwas*. This isn't a level that just anyone can reach.'

Zahra is a forty-two-year-old teacher who completed her primary studies in Qom's al-Zahra Seminary and is now teaching at this seminary in Tehran. On the *marja'iyat* of women, she says: 'Although a large number of seminarians graduate each year throughout Iran, only two women have reached the position of *marja'iyat* in the country's history so far: Madame Amin and Madame Sefati. The learning of these women is to be esteemed.'

Asked about the stages beyond *marja'iyat* for women, she's silent, and then says that I should ask those who've reached such high levels. She suggests I may find an answer on Madame Sefati's website.

In one of her articles, Madame Sefati writes: 'Not just among women, but even among men, reaching such a position is very hard. In addition to God's grace and the assistance of the Infallible Imams (peace be upon them), it also requires talent and aptitude. Achieving *marja'iyat* is difficult and our great ones only pursue it out of a sense of duty. (But) the grand Islamic jurists have said that masculinity is one of the preconditions for a source of emulation. We have to look at the reasoning for this. Does the reasoning apply only to men, and is it silent on women, so to speak? Or is there a firm, irrefutable basis for saying that a woman who has achieved seniority in *ijtihad* — even if she is not senior among men — cannot be emulated?'

After discussing the subject, she concludes that the only obstacle to the emulation of women is jurists' opinions and, of course, if the number of women who achieve *marja'iyat* increases, opinions on the subject will become more varied.

Teaching or eulogising Other than achieving the level of *marja'iyat*, which is considered virtually beyond reach, teaching in seminaries, eulogising the Imams in women's religious gatherings and, of course, taking up employment in some government posts are some of the options open to women seminarians. The seminary's director explains that, in order to take up any of these positions, the graduates have to complete specific courses — for eulogising, during which the students learn about the presentation of religious teachings to an audience and the leading of religious gatherings, among other things. The director underlines that this is a grave and difficult occupation. Apart from being highly motivated, the applicant must be good at public relations and, of course, have a suitable voice.

Amid animated discussion about the seminarians' future, Akram, a third-year student, admits: 'In the national scheme on the *hejab*, we are the ones who are involved as the people who train the girls.' These words divert the discussion in another direction.

Not only do female seminary students see the *hejab* as an ally, they see it as the reason for women's security in society. They believe that those who don't wear the *hejab* are deceived and ignorant. I ask Akram about the possibilities that the *hejab* has created for her. She says: 'Ask me, what restrictions can it create? I can drive with this *chador*, I go shopping, I go to parties, I do sports —' I interrupt her: 'You do sports?'

She smiles victoriously and replies: 'Yes, I play basketball. We compete under fair conditions.' The members of both teams have similar outfits: *hejabs*, *manteau*, trousers and head-and-neck coverings.

Wedding gown in the house of learning In the seminary's library, young women have gathered in a corner around a white piece of cloth destined to become a wedding gown for one of the students. Another student is the seamstress. The classmates are giving opinions on the style of the dress. At one of the suggestions, the bride blushes with embarrassment, saying: 'I don't like that model.' Everyone laughs and jokes — What? Since when can a bride overrule a future sister-in-law?

The match had been organised in this same seminary. Zahra was looking for a chaste and pious girl for her brother, and Fatemeh introduced her classmate Parisa to her. Fatemeh objects: 'I wish I'd been struck dumb and had never said anything. Now, if it turns out well, they'll take the credit for it, but if it turns out badly, I'll be the one to be cursed.' This is the fourth marriage that has been organised in the seminary and, of course, Fatemeh continues: 'It'll be the last one, too. No one will dare any more. Where are you going to find a rich groom? Where are you going to find a pretty bride?' All the students laugh again. A quick glance around at the seminary students shows that she's not far wrong. Compared with the girls outside these walls, they neither have well-shaped eyebrows, nor have they plucked their facial hair, nor do they wear any makeup. Underneath their scarves or head-and-neck coverings, you can't even see the colour of their hair.

It's two in the afternoon and the seminarians who've been in class all morning prepare to leave. From bigger-than-normal handbags, they pull out black *chadors* that look the same. Coloured head-and-neck coverings are replaced by black ones. Black gloves are pulled firmly into place underneath long, black sleeves and watches re-strapped over them. The thickness of the tights is checked one more time and, finally, they throw on their *chadors* and cover their cheeks and mouths with them. Behind this thick, black covering, it is only the glints in their eyes that differentiate them. It is the same glint that their teachers must be protected from with a curtain — the one of youth and vitality.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

Photo Essay **Kaveh Golestan** Text **Malu Halasa**

Younger prostitutes were better paid by the clients in Shahr-e No.

Shahr-e No

Portraits of prostitutes before the Revolution

When photojournalist Kaveh Golestan first went into Shahr-e No ('New City'), he hid his camera in a bag of fruit. Men were welcomed as customers, but a photographer needed a special introduction to the prostitutes who lived and worked there from 1975 to 1979. Eventually a social worker became an ally, and Golestan's intensely personal portraits were taken after he befriended the prostitutes and learned about their lives.

Shahr-e No was a walled, labyrinthine edifice of brothels with decrepit waiting rooms, cubicles, bedrooms, apartments, and drinking and drug dens.

Many of the women were heroin addicts. Golestan told his wife Hengameh that the prostitutes had aged before their time. He knew women of thirty who had lost all their teeth. Some had come to the brothels as girls; others had been born there. The younger ones were better paid, and this is reflected in his photographs by their clothes and rooms. A few of the older, luckier ones became madams, but many ended up reduced to working as toilet attendants. Despite personnel changes in Shahr-e No, trade was lucrative. One prostitute told Golestan she had been with ninety men in a single night. The photographer told his wife that what he remembered most was the acrid odour of smouldering garbage — every day, mountains of used tissues were burnt in Shahr-e No's yard.

In these photographs, the women gaze at the camera with trust. Some of them betray no emotion, neither happy nor sad, just resigned. In a world of sordid fantasies, Golestan's view was non-judgmental, even welcoming. Eventually he gave the women pictures of themselves, which they hung on their walls. He was deeply disturbed in 1979 when an arson attack by religious militias burned Shahr-e No to the ground, killing some of the women.

Golestan's exhibition of these photographs, along with others of Tehran's dispossessed, was closed down by SAVAK, the Shah's secret police. Unflattering views of Iran were routinely censored. These rarely published photographs of Shahr-e No show Golestan's development as a powerful witness of his times.

Kaveh Golestan images appear courtesy of the Kaveh Golestan Estate.
www.kavehgolestan.com

In brothel reception rooms, women grew bored as they waited for clients.

In some of the brothels, the women were allowed to live with their children.

Unless they were pimps, few men were photographed in Shahr-e No.

This prostitute had all the relevant medical documentation that said she was clean.

Some of the women in Shahr-e No loved pets.

With all the modern appliances in her bedroom, this prostitute pretended to be a housewife.

A prostitute covered her face to hide her identity in the photograph.

In the dark, a young woman waits in her bedroom.

Chickens and other animals lived in the brothels.

Used tissue and garbage were burnt everyday in the yard.

Troubled Paradise

Tehran's garden suburb has been turned into a building site

1 At 6 AM the sun casts a swathe of hot light over Elahiyeh. From my grandmother's balcony there is a view of the whole neighbourhood, nestled in the purple shadows of the Alborz mountain range. Even now, a woodpeckering of machines — drilling, boring, smashing and scraping — disrupts the early morning calm. Cranes like mechanical trees swing across the skyline of northern Tehran. In my neighbourhood, as in many others across the city, construction is king.

Between various emerging monoliths I can see my old street, Amin Street, and my family's plot of land, which once contained the villa built by my grandfather, an engineer/architect. The brick wall that surrounds the property is still there, buckling like an old man's creaky knees. Within its perimeter stand two white-stone apartment blocks, three storeys high, with still, dark and dusty balconies. Of the gardens, only the plane trees remain along one side of the narrow street, where a melt-water stream flows from the mountains — a typical sight in Tehran, one that hasn't yet changed.

The capital is in the throes of a housing boom. Predictions estimate that the city's population will swell to between 15 and 27 million in the next four years. Fifteen to twenty families living in multistorey apartment buildings have replaced the four or five families that once inhabited a handful of big houses along my street. Despite increasing pollution, overcrowding and failing amenities, even the threat of earthquakes, skyscraper construction continues unabated. Elahiyeh, once a gracious garden suburb, is being consumed by urban sprawl. Can its infrastructure — sewage, water and electricity — which once served a few, withstand the pressure of so many?

Change came slowly to the area. In 1979, when families abandoned their houses and embassies closed their gates, the new government appropriated many of the properties. These either entered a state of limbo where deeds became null and void, or newly established Islamic charities laid claim to land and houses belonging to the Shah's ministers, high-ranking army officers, foreigners, old-money families and the embassy crowd. A different set of neighbours moved in — supporters of the new regime, and the homeless and poor.

Although there was no census around the time of the Revolution, floods of people from towns and villages on the border with Iraq fled the bombs and sought refuge in the major cities. Between 1976 and 1982, Tehran's population mushroomed by three million. Revolution and war also impacted on birth rates for the next decade. In some years the rate went up by a third in twelve months. Suddenly the government found good use for the empty plots in Elahiyeh, where land was cheap and plentiful. The era of skyscrapers had begun.

In 1990 Gholamhossein Karbaschi, then the appointed mayor of Tehran, came up with a series of controversial policies, the most lucrative based on property sales, to make the municipality financially independent. In 1986 they accounted for 25 percent of total revenues. By 1992, under Karbaschi, they increased fivefold. The mayor, who was also the secretary of the Engineers' Union (which has close ties to the construction trade), became known as 'the man who sold Tehran's air' because the empty space above buildings was also valuable. High rent meant constant pressure to build above permitted legal levels. At the right price, the municipality allowed developers of high-rise and luxury apartments to turn a one-storey building into however many storeys they could afford. Sometimes the municipality entered into partnership with the construction companies and profited from the sale of flats. However, due to the increased social density of some neighbourhoods, there were demands to enforce a height limit on buildings of four to six storeys.

Karbaschi also pushed through plans for public parks, libraries, sports centres and cultural centres, but as the coffers of the mayor's office brimmed over he was imprisoned on corruption charges. His swift departure appears to be part of a pattern that emerged during the 1990s. Outnumbered by conservatives in Parliament, reformists like Karbaschi and the succession of mayors who followed him were found guilty either of embezzlement or mismanagement.

Towers were already shaping Elahiyeh's new skyline by the time Morteza Alviri came to office in 1999. The problem was that no one could decide how high the buildings should be allowed to rise. Under Alviri, five storeys was the limit, but when he resigned in 2002 — again under accusations of mismanagement — the next mayor, Mohammad-Hassan Malekmadani, went back to two.

Meanwhile, land prices skyrocketed. Plots worth 300,000 *tomans* (roughly £300 today) in 1971 sold for a hundred times more. Overnight, the garden estates of Elahiyeh became construction sites, and again the law lagged behind. Since the 1980s there had been attempts to safeguard the quality of the city's air supply. The Revolutionary Council asked the Tehran municipality to give every urban tree a plaque and levy taxes for felling them according to species, with walnut and mulberry worth up to 5 million *tomans* each (roughly £2,500).

Reaction to the new law was swift, and fires consumed the big gardens of Elahiyeh, as the law only protected healthy trees, not those that were diseased or dead. So people stopped watering their trees, or poisoned them. In instances where taxes were paid, the amounts were meagre compared to the profits from

skyscraper construction. Not even the mayor of Tehran could save the trees. In January 2003, Malekmadani was given a five-month jail sentence for selling construction permits that threatened the preservation of green spaces, increased traffic problems and ignored the minimum standards for distance between buildings.

As the reformist movement weakened in government and the city council became increasingly dominated by religious conservatives, the strong backing of the next mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, suggested that the failures of the preceding reformist mayors were due more to their politics than to their policies. One of Ahmadinejad's biggest preoccupations as mayor was traffic, in a city where 700 new cars are registered every-day. His proposal to build a monorail for Tehran has been nearly abandoned.

2 Elahiyeh means 'paradise' in Farsi. From my grandmother's balcony, some greenery is visible through the skyscrapers, the remnants of walled gardens that date back to 1921 when the whole of Elahiyeh, composed of three estates, was passed down by a Qajar king. While it's nearly impossible for me to imagine wheatfields and orchards of pear, apple and cherry where the super-highways now crisscross, my grandmother cherishes such childhood memories. She and her family made the daylong journey from southern Tehran on the back of a donkey to the coolness of the foothills of the Alborz mountains. All summer long the children raced up and down the hills and soaked themselves under waterfalls. At night they slept on the roof, under a dizzying canopy of stars, and woke at dawn, sheltered from the mountain chill under thick blankets. Elahiyeh was their Eden.

Once it became favoured by foreign embassies and diplomatic staff, walled gardens and grand residences bloomed. According to a historian of the area, some of the negotiations for nationalising oil under Prime Minister Mossadegh took place in a palace that belonged to a Qajar princess. My mother says she remembers the horses and stables from her childhood.

In the 1930s my Swedish grandfather Jacob Mellegard came to Tehran as a young engineer, established the construction company, Svenska Entreprenad AB (SENTAB), and won large contracts that helped build the modern nation of Reza Shah, father of the last Shah. In every corner of the country, SENTAB constructed bridges, hospitals and roads. It built the University of Tehran and Mehrabad Airport. Whenever I land there I recall the stories my parents told me about the 1960s, of international partygoers heading to Mehrabad for a cooked breakfast after dancing all night. The imprint of that era is faint in the bricks and mortar of the city today.

My grandfather built the house where I spent the first years of my life, a redbrick one-storey villa with a porch and sloping roof. There was a patio paved with large stones, and beyond that a garden fringed by rosebushes and the canopies of tall trees near a swimming pool. It was a style of architecture favoured by Europeans.

There is a photograph of me on the day I was brought home from the hospital after my birth, with my mother and three brothers standing by the garden wall, which is covered with spring climbing roses. Beyond the wall, not visible in the photo, is Amin Street. During my formative years I played in the garden, making flower-and-leaf stew for the dogs or searching for Oscar, our pet tortoise. Sometimes I called over the wall to Reza, the boy who lived next door. If he was home, he climbed the wall and we chatted together before deciding where to play. I remember thinking the family next door was odd because his mother wore a *chador* inside the home. Reza's family was such a contrast to ours. My brothers' friends came for swimming parties, and my mother taught aerobics to her friends in the house on the adjoining property, which belonged to my grandparents.

It was at the top of our garden, separated by a wrought-iron gate. The steps led up to another garden in which my grandmother planted daisies, cornflowers and tall grasses to resemble a Swedish meadow; there was a small paddling pool for me. Inside the house, my grandfather had a low-standing bookshelf for a game I liked to play: pulling out his architecture books into a heap on the floor.

Occasionally, life intruded from Amin Street. In spring a man brought carts piled high with mounds of camel dung, which he tipped onto the lawn, creating an unbearable stink. As a child, the odd trips to the baker at the end of our street were filled with adventure for me: the sight of the bric-a-brac man, or the smell of corn on the cob grilled on a brazier and then dipped in saltwater and butter.

3 Whenever I come home to Elahiyeh, I like to wander around our neighbourhood and take in the changes. However, I've often noticed that, as a woman alone, I attract unwanted attention: men stare and mutter under their breath. Nowadays most people drive, and the lack of pavements isn't conducive to long walks. In many ways I'm trapped in the Elahiyeh of old, when it was quiet with little traffic and many hills for rambling.

Two women walking together is more socially acceptable, so twenty-eight-year-old Samaneh Ghadarkhan, a city reporter, agrees to accompany me as I research the neighbourhood. Samaneh, who was

born after the Revolution, is fascinated by the Tehran's past — one she, too, believes is quickly being obliterated.

I take us to a shortcut that avoids zigzagging through traffic and leads down the hills from my grandmother's apartment block to my old street. Huge, green stone steps have been cut into a hill. Few people use the path, but I can remember my grandmother and I walking it and the challenge it posed for a three-year-old, ascending the massive steps in endless succession. Going down them now, I see they are beginning to fall away on the side where the foundation for a building has been newly laid. I wonder how long the sheltered and somewhat secret pathway will survive once the apartment block is built.

Directly ahead of us is Amin Street. Ten metres wide, it seems narrower with the cars hugging the stream and trees on one side and our old brick wall on the other. The whole of the opposite side of the street from where my house used to be is taken up by grubby, three-storey brick apartment blocks.

To the right, at the end of the street, the smell of fresh bread has attracted a breakfast queue outside the bakery, mostly Afghans and construction workers waiting for the sheets of stone-baked *lavash* to be folded into steaming piles out of the *tanoor*. A young man called Nasari sits outside the last brick villa on the street, tearing into the hot, thin bread and rolling it around a bit of cheese.

That is the house where some Swedish neighbours of ours lived before the Revolution. When they left, an Islamic charity took it over, but from what I can see no one has lived there since. A glimpse through the garden door reveals that the roof of the house has fallen through, and branches are growing into the windows.

Nasari, who speaks quietly and doesn't ever glance up at us, looks after the property. He came to Tehran from Kabul and quickly found that his nationality gave him an advantage. Afghan cheap migrant labour is preferred for caretakers, as Afghans are thought to be generally more suspicious and less likely to allow snoopers onto the property.

When I explain that I used to live on the street, he agrees to show us the house and garden; but Samaneh hesitates, whispering to me that it would be unwise to go in, and that she could ask her husband to come back with us another time. Later she explains that many of the rapes that happen in Tehran are thought to be committed by Afghan men. Samaneh is open and frank: 'Please understand, it's not just the fact that he's Afghan, but who would know where we were, if anything happened?' Even though I've lived here, it is clear who is more streetwise.

Instead we walk back up the street to where my old house used to be. The house number is the same, but now there is a buzzer for the flats in the blocks occupying what used to be our garden. Mr Sadekhi, a distinguished grey-haired man in his sixties, comes to the door and immediately recognises my family name. When he tells me the electricity meter is still registered to the Mellegards I joke, saying I hope we won't have to pay twenty-six years' worth of bills. Mr Sadekhi bought the plot from the woman to whom my mother sold our property, and for six or seven years he lived in my house. There was a swimming pool, but he had been afraid he might be reported for having decadent Western habits; so it lay empty, peeling and withered.

When Mr Sadekhi's children were earning their degrees in Germany he built apartments for each of them, and in 1999 the villa, garden and swimming pool gave way to blocks of flats. By this time my grandparents' house, which once adjoined our property, had already been built over.

This coincided with a black period before Khatami's 1997 elections, when journalists, political activists and writers were murdered in a brutal purge. The thread of suspicion, which weaves through most societies in a state of flux, knotted itself into the fabric of everyday life, and people who lived in houses became fearful they were being spied on and reported to the secret police. Many sold up and moved into what they considered the safety and security of apartments. There were economic incentives as well. Interest rates abroad were at a high, and profits from Tehran property sales grew in foreign bank accounts.

Mr Sadekhi asks how I feel, standing where my old house used to be. In many ways, I'm glad that it no longer exists. The fact that there's no physical trace of the world I knew leaves my memories intact. Perhaps if an anonymous skyscraper had been put up I might have felt differently. As it is, the gentle curves of the balconies and the buildings' French-inspired architecture is more in keeping with the feel of Elahiyeh than the glass and steel of the new construction.

Dusk encircles the neighbourhood of my childhood. A faint breath of wind lifts dust like a sigh — an exhalation at the end of the day. Traffic crawls along. Quiet, leafy streets built for families living in houses cower under the weight of twenty-storey buildings with several apartments to each floor and never — ever — enough parking. No longer the hardy Peykans but Prides, Parsians and Benzes shuffle along Elahiyeh's narrow streets.

Samaneh and I make our way down Amin Street, but I'm confused. How did the tower blocks come to be built in the first place? If the law prevented anyone from building more than two or five storeys, according to the mayor of the day, how was it ignored? A twenty-storey building isn't exactly easy to hide. We walk past an estate agent and figure someone in the property business should be able to tell us.

'Construction is more powerful than the law of the land,' explains the estate agent, who asks to remain nameless. He takes us a few streets away to the old Swedish embassy, a 7,000 m² property where a giant skyscraper is under construction. A notice has been placed on the gate: in October 2003 permission was granted to build twenty storeys. In 2002, under Malekmadani, the limit was two. When I ask the estate agent what happened, he only shrugs. Apparently, there were ways of circumventing the law: by having permission from before it was passed, for example, or by using contacts in government. 'Property, power and politics — they're intertwined. It's like a mafia controlling everything,' he says.

Elahiyeh has the most expensive real estate in Tehran, if not the whole country, with plots selling for 1.5 billion *tomans* (£750,000) last year. So it is no surprise that high-ranking government insiders and their families have already snapped up a significant portion of it. As the streets start to darken, the neighbourhood draws a different crowd. Kurds selling binoculars do a roaring trade. Because the skyscrapers are packed so close together in such narrow streets, a new pastime has emerged: peering into other people's flats.

4 One summer I accompanied a cousin to the eye hospital in downtown Tehran and realised it was one of my grandfather's buildings. The manager, again recognising my grandfather's name, told us that a new wing had been added a few years ago. 'Last time there was an earthquake,' he continued, 'the new wing suffered damage. You can see the cracks in the walls. But your grandfather's building from decades ago is as solid as a rock. That's what you call engineering.'

Earthquakes are not a new threat. Japanese seismologists who made an assessment of Elahiyeh concluded that the small tremors, commonplace in the country, were not a risk to the 12-metre wide skyscraper-filled streets. However, the next significant earthquake (over 6.5 on the Richter Scale) would leave 90 percent of the population under debris, and because of the narrow streets no help would reach them.

You would have thought that the eventuality of a citywide catastrophe would make facts and figures more readily available to the public. But whenever Samaneh calls various borough offices for statistics, she is always told — very courteously — that someone will call her back right away. They never do, and both of us wonder if the information exists at all.

Eventually we get to speak to Mr Zahedi, a councillor in Elahiyeh in his eighties. In the past, water management was a primary concern. Years ago, some of the big houses used to release their sewage into streams running alongside the streets in the dead of night, and a putrid smell hung over the neighbourhood; but that doesn't happen any more. The sewage system in the hills of Elahiyeh is the oldest in Tehran. It was dug five metres deep in the hills so that sewage wouldn't mix with the water from the city's natural underground springs. Because of the new apartment blocks the old system has been overwhelmed in some places, and sewage burning though the old pipes has seeped into the drinking water.

Next to the bakery is a corner shop that has been in business for over fifty years. Crowded with packets of biscuits, cartons of sour cherry juice, squares of white cheese floating in water, boxes of tissues with cartoon faces smiling in brash colours, this small shop probably stocks just about everything in its nooks and crannies and stacks of floor-to-ceiling shelves. From behind his counter the owner, Mr Heydari, has observed all the changes in the neighbourhood. When Elahiyeh was home to embassies, Americans were his best customers and Europeans his worst. Now the store has become a crowded centre where the *nouveau riche* buy milk alongside a few old-timers and gangs of chic youngsters from the nearby cafés. While Samaneh and I are talking to him, a woman comes in for cigarettes. A shock of bleached-blonde hair erupts from her headscarf, and the contrast with her thick, dark eyebrows reminds me of Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet*. She has a haughty look about her, and the Afghan workmen in their baggy trousers cast sideways glances at her — as we all do.

Business is much better for Mr Heydari now. He prefers the social melting pot. In the past, he says, the only contact he had with the wealthy residents was through their servants, drivers and gardeners, who came to the shop. The people in the big houses were from a high social class, and thought a lot of themselves, he says. He sums it up using an expression I've never heard before: *Haser naboodan ba shah faloodeh boghoran.* ('They wouldn't have deigned to eat ice cream with the Shah.') By his furrowed brow, it's obvious he doesn't miss the old days, when the flash, foreign cars threw up dust as they sped around the corner.

He has a vivid memory, and reminisces about the day my parents got married and my grandmother ordered boxes of fruit juice from the shop. He can also see my grandfather whizzing about with snow chains on his Volvo and wearing a seatbelt. Mr Heydari's face wrinkles into a chuckle, because first, only a Swede could handle the icy winters of Elahiyeh and second, people begrudgingly wear seatbelts now, let alone thirty years ago, pulling them across when they pass a policeman before releasing them again.

On our way home, Samaneh and I pause in front of a tiny, pistachio-green van filled with keys and key-cutting tools outside the last house on Amin Street. Hassan, who minds it, says it has been here for eight years. His uncle, who owns it, makes a very good living.

Considering the average salary is 200,000 *tomans* (£100) a month, his 20,000 *tomans* (£10) per day is a fortune. A string of coloured bulbs like fairy lights hangs across the open side of the van. Hassan, who taps into the bakery for his electricity supply, cuts his keys and watches the neighbourhood.

In the fizzy orange streetlight glare, Elahiyeh's streets thicken with exhaust fumes from the masses of cars carrying rosy-lipped beauties and sultry-eyed young men to parties. Jammed side by side like sardines, there's enough time and plenty of inclination for flirting through car windows. Even though the cafés in the area display signs reminding women to remember their proper *hejab*, there's more freedom in this part of town, which attracts throngs of teenagers who want to do nothing more dangerous than hang out.

Back again on my grandmother's balcony, I see the pallor of towering skyscrapers in the making. Construction is like a death rattle in this city. Yet whispers float over the streams running down my old street where my house and garden once lay. Even for someone like Samaneh, who has only known life after the Revolution, the garden remains an ideal. She confided to me that she, too, would one day like to have one, 'if any are left' after Tehran's building frenzy. Another friend of mine won't sell her house despite the hundreds of prying eyes she feels are watching her because her garden is her refuge, in her words, 'from the rush of the city'.

These are not romantic, sentimental meanderings. The garden is a Persian invention dating back to the Achaemenid Empire (559 BC — 330 BC). In the old Iranian language of Avestan, according to Mehrdad Fakour in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 'the word *pairidaêza*, Old Persian *paridaida*, Medes *paridaiza* (walled-around, i.e. a walled garden), was transliterated into Greek *paradeisoi*, then rendered into the Latin *paradisus*, and from there entered into European languages, the French *paradis*, and the English 'paradise'.

Walled and enclosed, contemplative, relaxing, the garden and its promises permeate Persian poetry and culture. It also provides a meeting place for like-minded friends, or a space for a community.

Today in Iran, much is promised by an afterlife in Paradise. Ironically, this metaphorical garden appears, at least for some, more real and certainly more important than the ones that have been burned down and paved over. Tehran is the capital of a modern Islamic republic, but in many ways it resembles other overcrowded and poorly managed secular cities.

Essay **Soheila Beski** Photos **Abbas Kowsari**

A radical re-naming of monuments, squares and streets took place after the Revolution and some Tehranis are caught between shifting versions of the past.

Altered Landscapes

Public spaces after the Revolution

Revolution Square Early in the morning, Revolution Square is like a hole. It's not clear where the headlong masses pouring from it are going, but they somehow choose their way, find it and advance like the ants we used to watch when, as kids, we stood over their holes while they rushed past each other, never colliding, running this way and that.

In the square, the sculpted horseman who used to gallop over the city has been replaced by a strange structure — a squat, voluminous cylindrical column resembling a millstone, with carved figures of young men in headbands. And at the top, curiously out of proportion, is a small metal hand of the kind figured in the Ashura mourning ceremonies.[1]

All around the square, billboards have been hung on the some-small-some-tall buildings. Green metal railings fence off the pavements and, behind them, the bustling crowd circumnavigates the square without sparing a glance at the discoloured, broken-backed cinemas that gaze silently like gaping shop doorways in a bazaar.

On both sides of each crossing, young policemen — very young policemen — prevent the crowd from overflowing into the square. They blow their whistles to regulate the pedestrian flow according to the changing traffic lights. When the light turns green, the stream of pedestrians joins the two pavements together like a black line, and then the stream stops suddenly and the cars waiting behind the pedestrian crossing begin to move.

On the pedestrian bridge on one side of the square, I turn for an instant, searching for something: the switched-off neon sign on the building opposite, for Globe Tea; on this side, the smog-stained white sign for Pascal Laboratory; on that side, Richmond Tailors; and that's all. Nothing can make a heart tremble like the peculiar emotion, a mixture of sadness and pleasure, stirred up by the rediscovery of the past; the pleasure of remembering a time when, enchanted by the bright red colour of the double-decker buses in the square, we used to climb up their metal steps, which sounded strange underfoot and had a strange smell, to sit at the front, look into the open windows of buildings and experience the indescribable pleasure of moving over the square. The square wasn't fenced off by railings then, and was filled with the colours and scents of the posters outside the cinemas, the big cream buns in the bakery on a corner of the square, the crowds of university students clutching their books and waiting in the queues at bus stops and the irresistible attraction of the university and the bookshops.

And then I remember that here, everything at every moment bears the mark of its own demise. Nothing is lasting. Memories are buried. Minds quiver and flow, unsupported by anything outside that's permanent. They find nothing that's fixed and consequently aren't fixed on anything themselves. Maybe it's only scattered struggles and ruin that are constant and endless.

Freedom Square The light from the lamps hanging from tree branches fractures in the drops of the newly started rain. The faint smoke from the burning charcoal, on which skewers of kidney and liver kebab are being prepared, gently spreads and drifts upwards. The cafés on the banks of the Karaj River, the smell of kebab and the throng of late-summer holiday-makers returning from the north along the narrow, tree-lined road in the small hours of a blue evening present a delightful picture, as if a big party is under way in a beautiful garden. Slightly further on, cars slide into the spreading darkness and the shadow cast by the closely hugging mountains. The cars' red backlights form a dotted line extending to the beautiful bridge that separates the Karaj exit from the route to Tehran. A bright, clean tunnel swallows up the dotted line and, on the other side, suddenly, light-bedecked hills dazzle the eyes, like shiny diamonds. It's hard to believe that these glittering dots are the same labourers' houses that, in the revelatory light of day, are like underground ants' nests: holes brimming with toil and hardship that seem to have been left exposed, by a mere kick, to sweeping wind and burning sun.

The shimmering rays of distant lights, factories' blinking neon signs and the line of light of the oncoming traffic are beautiful in the midst of the darkness, which has hidden the throngs, the dust, the smog and everything that's ugly and odd. And, at the end of the route, at the meeting point of the big red river of freeways leading to the square and the ocean of light formed by the roads leading off of it, a monument that defies description appears on the right, bathed in light that shines from its base, a monument that has become the symbol of Tehran. In the daytime, surrounded by cars carrying, arriving and departing passengers, lost in the dust and smog that makes it a struggle to breathe, it mirrors the city's chaos and haste. At night, beautiful and incandescent, it reflects the mysterious allure of a big city — not just the possibility of expanded opportunities, but an attraction in its own right — and one loses oneself in streets among tall buildings and buses, colourful cinemas and shop windows filled with mesmerising goods. The chance is here

1 During the Ashura mourning ceremonies, which commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hossein in the desert of Karbala in 680 AD or 60 AH, men and women process through the streets beating their chests and weeping, wearing black clothes and headbands emblazoned with the names of Hossein and his followers.

Revolution Square

آموزشگاه آرایش مردانه

to be left entirely to oneself, and to escape other, silent towns, in which, among familiar faces that all seem to hail from the same clan, it's impossible to be alone.

This monument is not a symbol of the Pahlavis. It's not a symbol of freedom in Freedom Square either. It is the gateway to Greater Tehran into which cars disappear like drops of water sinking into a sponge.

Fatemi Crossroads, Sepah Shopping Centre In the queues in front of the Sepah cooperative stores, one's eyes are drawn to the old men. Even the cleanest and best-dressed among them are faded and worn. Shabby, short-sleeved summer jackets, white, yellow or cream-coloured trousers, old hats, all recall a bygone era. Discoloured, blotchy eyes. Soft, sagging cheeks. Imperceptibly bent backs and slow, faint movements. Most of them are middle-ranking former white-collar workers whose children have emigrated. They spend their mornings in queues, their afternoons in parks and their nights listening to foreign radio stations. Although the old shoes have been dusted and the few strands of hair have been carefully gone over with a wet comb, they're doleful, piteous, crumpled and colourless like shadows.

But the women aren't shadows. There's a violence in the way they stand, talk and lean, a kind of readiness to shove, to force one's way through, even to hit somebody. They are themselves, in their own element, at their usual post. They don't display the helplessness of people suddenly fired.

Lalezar Avenue Have you ever wondered why no one's ever thought of changing the name of Lalezar Avenue? Considered Tehran's Tin Pan Alley, the same street featured in the popular ditty about the lovely ladies of Lalezar, with eyes and lips you could die for.

Maybe it's the work of the ghosts and spirits that have stayed in Lalezar, ghosts hiding in the narrow alleyways behind the electrical-goods stores only a few metres deep; behind the smog-ridden, car-filled avenue with pavements hidden under motorcycles and hawkers' carts; in the middle of beautiful, derelict shopping arcades; underneath the glass dome capping a junction of passages in a small arcade filled with little boutiques with circular balconies, a novel amalgamation of Iranian bazaar and modern architecture. Maybe one of them is the architect of this same Boulevard Bazaar, haunting abandoned landings and rooms along with his buddies who built the beautiful buildings next door. Maybe they go to the small theatres now turned into cinemas, unseen by the ticket-seller sitting behind a small window at the back of the semicircular entrance hall. Or maybe they wander around in alleyways, furtively visiting the houses, the gable roofs of which are visible as red patches through the occasional gaps along the street — including Dear Uncle Napoleon's house,[2] still standing today with its marvellous faded red portico. The eglantine bush no longer exists and there are no pebbles left in the courtyard, but people as old as the house are still there. In a jacket that has shrunk as much as he has, an old man has tied a red neckerchief under the collar of his checked shirt. His hair is white, and his handlebar moustache salt-and-pepper. The keys jangle in his shaking hands. He's not afraid of ghosts: he speaks to them under his breath, says goodbye and locks the door.

The living don't come into these alleyways at night. They're afraid of the ghostly minstrels of Lalezar's tea houses, who still slouch behind the crumbling stairwells of derelict buildings and sniff the air of empty, silent, colourless and odourless streets that no longer ring with the sound of popular songs. They stubbornly haunt the beautiful Crystal Cinema, the Central Hotel and the tea houses that have been turned into sandwich shops.

This is the only possible answer: the night-wandering ghosts who safeguard Lalezar Avenue haven't allowed anyone to dream of changing its name.

Darakeh The chill in the air has eased. The racket made by the fat sparrows and the gentle, uplifting breeze that caresses your skin herald the approach of spring. We've been walking up the mountain for ten minutes and we're already furlongs away from a hectic, smog-ridden Tehran. We pass Darakeh Square, into which narrow and constricted alleyways lead like tiny brooks feeding a small pool; muddy stopping-off points at which it's impossible to imagine the delightful summery rests that they're intended for; crooked tea houses that look like they're falling down when viewed from outside but which, inside, serve mountaineers bread, butter, cheese, eggs and piping-hot tea; old houses with gable roofs and backyards full of junk; and twisting alleyways — overlooking a tangle of small mountain drops — which seem to begin nowhere and end nowhere, as we step on bits of blue-green stone that have fallen off loads carried by the mountain mules. The deafening but majestic roar

2 'Dear Uncle Napoleon' refers to a character in a popular, satirical 1970s TV serial, based on a book of the same name by Iraj Pizishkzad, about Iranian family life.

of the river, which seems to be flowing from an invisible source, recedes and advances until suddenly the gateway into the mountains opens wide.

Men and women, two by two, in groups or alone, stride along narrow paths, cross small, unsteady bridges past muleteers, small waterfalls and green pools. Deeply immersed in conversation, heated argument or heart-to-heart chat, they sit in tea houses with strange names, sturdy old tea trunks and the restful murmur of mountain streams. The boys have bare necks and wear leather wristbands, the girls are covered from head to toe in the standard loose coats with tin buttons as big as the palms of their hands. They talk up a storm, throw in the occasional sentence in English, take pictures with imaginary cameras and, when they see the public morality guards looking at them with hatred, fall silent and lower their eyes only to burst into laughter again and resume their clowning if they manage to walk past without being stopped.

The atmosphere is light-hearted and fun, despite the occasional presence of men with Colts in their holsters and two-way radios. There's no longer any sign of the groups of university students, young women and men, who wore faded jeans, carried cheap rucksacks and had serious and pensive expressions — the ones who used to come to the mountains at the crack of dawn on Fridays on cold, dark winter days or at daybreak on beautifully fresh summer mornings to learn resilience from its rugged cliffs, to place a flag at the summit and sing a rousing song. A devastating, destructive storm has swept them all away and taken them to distant lands. A torrential rainfall has washed away their footprints. But traces of them remain — hidden in the memories of those who returned or escaped death and still come to Darakeh — and will endure until the day they disappear with the survivors themselves.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

The road to Freedom Monument

The mountain walks of Darakeh

Tehran's Tin Pan Alley,
Lalezar Avenue

Essay **Zohreh Khoshnamak**

The poor surviving on subsistence levels on the margins of Tehran are often blamed for the city's high crime rate. In these neglected areas, drug addiction, homelessness, extortion and prostitution are rife.

Skewer Hill

On the edge of the city

The city is sleeping, and the clock's hands stand at shortly before 3 AM on Saturday, 24 February 2001. It's as if the silence in this part of the city is trying to speak. Tonight, an event is about to unfold.

The Khak-e Sefid occupies a big chunk of the northeast corner of Greater Tehran. It has altered a great deal over the preceding twenty-five years. Initially encouraged by Iran's rapid economic development in the early 1970s, this transformation received a huge boost following the Islamic Revolution, when Ayatollah Khosrowshahi declared: 'Land belongs to God, and anyone who makes it flourish becomes its owner.'

Large tracts of Khak-e Sefid were seized from their mainly Zoroastrian owners and split up into many smaller units. The area became a magnet for migrants arriving from towns and villages in different parts of the country, attracted by the easily available land and the hope of a better life in the city. Neighbourhoods formed, differentiated on the basis of the inhabitants' origins. There was an Azeri neighbourhood, an Amoli neighbourhood, a Yezidi neighbourhood and so on, but as most of the land had been usurped from its rightful owners, the majority of the inhabitants had very little legal right to be there. Of some 15,600 households that took root in Khak-e Sefid, it was estimated that fewer than 14 percent possessed any kind of ownership deeds, and in some cases these were merely bits of paper of rather dubious legal value, issued by various revolutionary bodies and institutions.

However, the area's most notorious residents did not begin to arrive until after the demolition of a collection of tin shacks along Parvin Avenue. Initially, it was easy to imagine that the city had cleansed itself of a blemish on its eastern face; but within a matter of months, the owners of the shacks had found a new home.

Part of Khak-e Sefid was still unoccupied, rejected even by the people who lived next to it underneath the high-tension electric cables. It consisted of a large mound of dumped rubble from building sites mixed with dirt from a nearby military garrison. Over time this hill disappeared from view beneath the shacks of the newcomers, but the name persisted. Its official title became 'Taleghani Township', but the people who lived there called it 'Skewer Hill'. To everybody else it was known as 'The Island'.

The Island's first settlers were also known by several different names, such as Qarachi; Gharbil-Band; Qar-Shomal; Luri; Luli; Gilani; Fiyuj; Zatt; and Gypsy. But they are usually referred to as Ghorbatis, from *ghorbat*, meaning 'exile' or 'far away from home'. Their distant ancestors had migrated west from the Indian subcontinent around 1000 AD, steadily spreading throughout Iran. Once this initial group had established itself on Skewer Hill, it was rapidly joined by what amounted to an invasion of their kith and kin from the northern towns of Amol, Babol, Gonbad and Gorgan.

The Ghorbatis could be distinguished from their new neighbours in many ways. They speak a different language, the meaning of which they conceal from the rest of the non-Ghorbati ('Taeis') world like a valuable trade secret. Their irreligious attachment to witchcraft and superstitious rituals, which they tend to view as the cause of and solution to many of their problems, also set them apart. But there is one aspect of their culture that defines them more than any other. To the Ghorbatis, the most heroic individual tends to be the one boldest in deviancy. This attitude sets the boundaries that govern their behaviour. Disregard for the law *is* the law. The usual inhibiting conventions simply do not apply.

The Ghorbatis can be divided into four clans according to their occupation. Sindhis tend to be beggars, although they sometimes sell *kebab* skewers or cutlery and other low-value items as a cover for their activities. The witches *(jadoogar)* engage in all forms of witchcraft, including séances, communicating with spirits, fortune-telling and Tarot card reading. The Sharshari specialise in burglary, either freelance or, at the right price, to order. Each of these clans might participate in other forms of illegality, but the undisputed masters of crime are the Qazul. They are prepared to commit any offence, from human trafficking and the sale of organs to robbery, extortion, prostitution and the distribution of drugs and alcohol.

The inhabitants of the Island were mainly Sharshari and Qazul. A particular social fabric, combined with pervasive poverty, squalor and lack of basic facilities, soon turned it into one of Greater Tehran's main centres of corruption, and crime. Indeed, as one police official confidently stated: 'Nowhere in the country is there a more sullied area.' The other neighbourhoods of the Khak-e Sefid may have been afflicted by the problems associated with low incomes, overcrowding and a steadily expanding population, but on the whole the people who lived there were considered decent and respectable. There were shops and other small businesses, even schools, to benefit the community, but these amenities, along with most other normal features of urban life, disappeared in Skewer Hill; the few shops that did remain stocked little more than basic herbs and food.

At the centre of the Island was a big square. Although it must have had some exits, it looked like a dead end. Sewage from the surrounding houses poured into the alleyways via metal pipes. The stench of filth and slime was constant. Most of the walls were blackened by the nightly fires of transient street dwellers. Piles of refuse were scattered everywhere. The houses constantly shed pieces of their unsuitable, flimsy construction

materials, adding to the proliferating debris in the streets. The shacks were small and contained few possessions. A bed, a tea table, a few dirty glasses and backrests and perhaps an opium pipe might have been the only indication of the presence of up to five different households. The darkness was barely attenuated by a single 40-watt lightbulb, highlighting the stains on the filthy walls. The lack of space, kitchens, hygienic toilets and clean bathrooms forced the inhabitants outside, and people washed, cooked and sometimes even relieved themselves in the street. This was also, for the most part, where they made their living.

Beatings and knife fights; foul language; gambling; theft; blackmail; bribery; the sale and consumption of drugs and alcohol; harassment; sexual offences; the buying and selling of stolen goods; and smuggling were all common. Scarcely an hour of the day or night passed without some incident involving the prostitutes, addicts, fugitives and destitute people who frequented the area. Murder was considered routine. If an addict dropped dead in one of the drug dens, the owner might bury the body somewhere in the house, sell up and move on.

Despite — or possibly because of — its fearsome reputation, the Island was generally considered beyond any form of official control. Since the Ghorbatis lacked any legitimate right to the land they lived on and stole the few services such as water, gas and electricity that were available, they were resolutely resistant to outside interference. Dealing with them was risky, so representatives of the utility companies preferred not to visit the Island. A census taker foolhardy enough to go there would be lucky to emerge relieved of only his notebook and bicycle. Residents seemed to possess a sixth sense for detecting danger, and could make things very difficult for anybody they considered a nuisance. Even those in search of 'immoral services' preferred to be unobtrusive. If a stranger entered and never returned, there was nothing anybody could do.

The situation was such that when the original owners of the land eventually obtained a court order evicting the squatters after many years of trying, it proved to be unenforceable. The police were apparently powerless. Any intrusion by patrols from the local station was likely to be met with a barrage of insults, jeering and missiles. The Ghorbatis displayed an alarming solidarity when threatened; unpredictable, violent crowds could form very easily. Matters were made worse by the fact that the maze of ramshackle streets and buildings was interconnected via rooftops and a half-hidden network of passageways. The detection, pursuit or arrest of offenders was practically impossible.

On the rare occasions that a criminal could be apprehended, the Ghorbatis had become adept at bending the rules to their own advantage. They might injure themselves and claim police brutality; mothers would throw their own children hard against the ground and charge the officers with assault. It was safer for the police to turn a blind eye and hope that the worst excesses would be contained within the Island.

Ghorbati children were accustomed to paying the price for their guardians' delinquency. Disease and the prevailing loose social structure meant they were often unrelated to the families they lived with. Many had no roof over their heads at all. As such they could be treated as little more than commodities to be used as and when the need arose. From their earliest years, when their nappies could provide a convenient hiding place for hashish, they were exposed to the corrosive depredations of life on Skewer Hill.

Unlike their contemporaries from other districts of the Khak-e Sefid, Ghorbati children could not look forward to jobs in a plastic-injection plant, washer-insertion workshop or car-spares depot along with at least some part-time education. Unacquainted with work or studying, they were more likely to be rented out to professional beggars or, ragged and unwashed, wander the streets stealing radios from cars. The Ghorbatis had no interest in sending their children to school. The few who did attend were usually expelled for disruptive, antisocial conduct in any case. Children had other uses: for example, if an adult ran into difficulties, a youngster could be made to take the blame and serve the jail sentence. They also formed a front-line defence against any unwelcome visitors.

Mir-Hashem experienced their tactics firsthand. He had gone to the Island to visit a friend, and on the way had somehow become involved in a fight. As a boxer, and still a young man, he felt confident that he could look after himself and was fighting quite courageously until a gang of noisy children suddenly surrounded him. Within seconds, the uproar attracted the attention of their mothers, who arrived on the scene ululating furiously. Dizzy from the shrieking, which he understood to be a warning to the men who hadn't heard the kids, and knowing what he did about the Island, Mir-Hashem realised that his only chance was to run for his life.

The friend he had intended to visit was called Farman Qahremani Azar. They had known each other since they were seventeen, when they met at the boxing hall. Farman was the bigger and stronger of the two and, like a lot of the other guys at the gym, Mir-Hashem looked up to him. The more they fought and bickered, the more their friendship grew. They would give each other black eyes at the club but afterwards, outside, they'd find a grassy spot by a brook and have a picnic. Farman lived at the heart of the Island and Mir-Hashem lived about ten minutes away.

Farman was, in many ways, a typical resident of Skewer Hill. He was actually Azeri, but had lived in the Island since childhood. Following his father's death, his

mother abandoned him in search of a new life. He moved in with his grandmother, who owned a property in the neighbourhood. Effectively, Farman became a Ghorbati and spoke with a combined Ghorbati-Azeri accent, which only made him seem all the more endearing. He had a good sense of humour and, in typical Ghorbati style, was unruly and proud. But most of all he was trouble.

As trained boxers, the two young men were sometimes paid to rough people up a bit, and this had made them even closer friends. For a time, casual violence and smoking provided the only evidence that Farman had been influenced in any way by growing up in the middle of the criminal underworld. However, after his grandmother decided to quit Skewer Hill and return to her original village, things began to deteriorate. For the second time in his life, he was on his own.

At first he continued to make ends meet as a builder on various construction projects in other parts of the city. But the Island's temptations of easy money and excitement proved irresistible. From drifting on the fringes he was inevitably drawn deeper. The cigarettes were replaced by hashish, then opium and finally heroin. Gradually the myth of glamour and success faded away to reveal an all too common reality: a dingy corner in a stranger's house where, trapped by addiction, he subsisted as a low-level drug dealer in exchange for a place to sleep and a bite to eat. This was the uncertain future that faced Farman in the early hours of the morning on 24 February.

At precisely 3 AM someone, somewhere, issued an order and without warning, an ominous, clattering rumble shook the inhabitants of the Island out of their torpor. Huge, steel shipping containers were pushed into place, blocking each of the district's entry points. Highly trained teams of fully armed policemen wearing riot gear, supported by 2,000 additional officers, surrounded the entire area. During the previous four months some of these officers had visited Skewer Hill disguised as itinerant cloth, broad-bean and beetroot salesmen. The information they gathered was put to good use; even the tunnels prepared as emergency escape routes were blocked. Within ten minutes, 10,000 m^2 of depravity was completely sealed off.

Taken by surprise, those caught inside were in no position to resist as the policemen began to advance methodically, from house to house. The occupants of each building were tagged according to location and taken to the containers. From there, they were transported in one of the many buses parked nearby either to a temporary camp or directly to a detention centre. After confiscating any evidence, the policemen threw the remaining contents of the shack out into the street. A special form was hurriedly filled in, detailing inventory and an estimated value for the property; then the structure was demolished. The procedure was repeated until each of the Island's 450 households and 3,000 residents had been dealt with. By dawn Skewer Hill was reduced to the desolate rubbish tip from which it emerged.

Elsewhere in the Khak-e-Sefid, this was cause for rejoicing. For years, residents complained to the authorities about the injuries and abuses inflicted by the hated Ghorbatis. Now, at last, their prayers were being answered. It is as though the Ghorbatis and their clients shared the same fate as the Ud and Samud, ancient Arab tribes annihilated in retribution for their disobedience by a wrathful God. The eradication of the shameful mark allowed people to leave their homes without fear of thugs or the prospect of returning with their pockets empty. They would no longer have to worry about their children becoming ensnared by vice. Action was taken to defend their families and their honour. As news of the raid spread, some people distributed pastries and sweets to demonstrate their gratitude and joy.

The police also had reason to feel happy with their night's work. The main target of the operation had been drug trafficking. With 1,000 suspects directly linked to the trade in custody, including fifty thought to be involved at higher levels, it seemed safe to assume that the raid would have a significant impact on a business that extends from control centres in the Island throughout the country and into Europe. The timing could not have been better, coinciding as it did with a visit by a British cabinet minister, accompanied by a delegation studying the drug situation in Iran. In addition to positive international signals it was hoped that the incident would provide a strong moral lesson domestically. By facing justice, the guilty would serve as both a warning and deterrent.

An unexpected consequence of the raid quickly became apparent in the Khak-e Sefid. Unwelcome as they had been, the large number of people attracted to the Island had made a substantial contribution to the local economy. Even the Ghorbatis had been unable to steal absolutely everything they needed. Now typical small shopkeepers discovered they could lose nearly two-thirds of their income. Despite this setback it was still generally agreed that it was better to be poor and honest than live near such people. There was widespread expectation that, in the long run, the purge would result in improved conditions. The Ghorbatis were thought to have been a major obstacle to innovation, selfishly blocking asphalt and renovation, which they feared would make them more easily accessible to the authorities. Their removal would open the way for some much-needed progress. The persistent problems of property ownership could be resolved, and land prices and rents would rise. Optimism reached a peak when, four months after its destruction, the mayor of Tehran celebrated International Anti-drugs Day by presiding over the groundbreaking ceremony for a new culture and sports centre to be constructed on

the ruins of the Island. But already, like the weeds in the wreckage, disturbing signs began to surface.

Naturally, not everybody was at home in Skewer Hill at the time of the raid. Rumours persisted that some of the biggest criminals — men like Majid Tarzan, clan leader of the Sharshari and *fadaeeyn* of the Qazuls, having mysteriously received word of what was about to happen, fled north on the previous evening. Of those arrested, many were ultimately released without charge due to lack of definitive evidence and the Ghorbatis' traditional reluctance to inform on each other. The police operation did not include any plans for cultural or social programmes designed to alleviate the demand for the goods and services these people formerly provided. To feed this undiminished appetite the Ghorbatis and their accomplices slowly begin to reorganise.

The Island was always the highly visible centre of a web of safe-houses and contact points spread throughout the city, and these venues became the focus for the renewed activity. Areas such as Shahriar and Rajaei-Shah experienced an increase in burglary and bag-snatching, an unmistakable symptom of their new status. Necessity further modifies the market: with supplies restricted, hashish and opium rapidly became more expensive. At the same time the value of heroin dropped by more than half as gangsters and addicts, desperate to maintain their habits, scrambled to undercut each other. Dealers resorted to adulterating the drug with a variety of substances including crushed codeine pills, powdered milk, sweet root, wood ash, henna, antipyrine, turpentine, chalk and, it was said, the dust of crushed prayer stones in an attempt to maximise revenue. Average purity decreased from 45 to 20 percent.

Alcohol suffered similar shortages and reduced quality, but the cost of the small quantities of fake whisky, vodka and diluted *arak* offered for sale did not decline. Many consumers switched to drinking ethanol, freely available from pharmacies and certain grocery stores, and there was a sharp rise in related kidney and liver problems, damaged eyesight and poisoning. Ironically, the government Ministry of Health controlled this lucrative trade, owning both the pharmacies and the alcohol-production facilities. The pharmacies also stocked tablets intended as a clinical substitute to opium but equally open to abuse.

Addicts wanting to quit had always been more likely to resort to alcohol. Scarcity and high prices drove increasing numbers to the cheap, contaminated heroin. The dangers were greatest for those who used it intravenously, and by autumn more than 600 people were dead.

During its infamous heyday, the Island satisfied desires other than those for intoxication. From the early hours of any morning, remarkably clean, well-dressed women wearing heavy makeup and expensive jewellery loitered on its corners. They looked like they were from another part of town, which was usually the destination of the luxurious cars they entered. Those not chosen were left to compete with younger girls, who wore petticoats revealing alluring glimpses of hair and ankles, to attract what business they could from the shiftless, passing crowds.

Perhaps only one in ten of the women were Ghorbatis. Although many had the advantages of a physical appearance that make them irresistible to Iranian men and an easy virtue born of a lifetime acquaintance with every imaginable form of human conduct, most Ghorbati women preferred other types of employment. Selling drugs was a popular alternative given that men felt much safer when dealing with a woman. Casual prostitution could be a means of securing the well-connected boyfriend that represented the height of their ambitions, but they were usually content to leave the business to others.

There were numerous promising replacements. Formerly married women whose husbands were dead, in jail or on the run were obvious candidates. Homelessness, deprivation, drugs and alcohol motivated many more. All these young women and girls were vulnerable to the corrosive effects of this lifestyle. The livelier and better-looking could perhaps expect a relatively pleasant interlude as the plaything of a rich and respected racketeer, but as their charms faded and they were cast aside, they were as susceptible as their plainer sisters to the inevitable pressures. Bought and sold like possessions and afflicted with disease and addiction, it was easy to sink to the lowest level. Isolated and looked down upon, especially by the Ghorbatis who became their masters, they were compelled either to subsist as servants, required to submit to any kind of handling, or starve in the street.

These women were defenceless once the Island was gone. Some took to cleaning car windscreens at crossroads and sorting through garbage. More were absorbed into the bordellos and tightly organised prostitution rings that began to develop. But for those at the bottom, lower even than Farman, there were very few options left. At first they congregated in the Paradise Gardens section of the Lavizan Forest north of the city, but this offered no protection against life-threatening assault, prosecution and the coming winter. As the cold weather closed in, they could be seen haunting the Martyr Babaei freeway, seeking temporary shelter in the cabs of long-distance lorries and minibuses. Where these vehicles would take them was unknown.

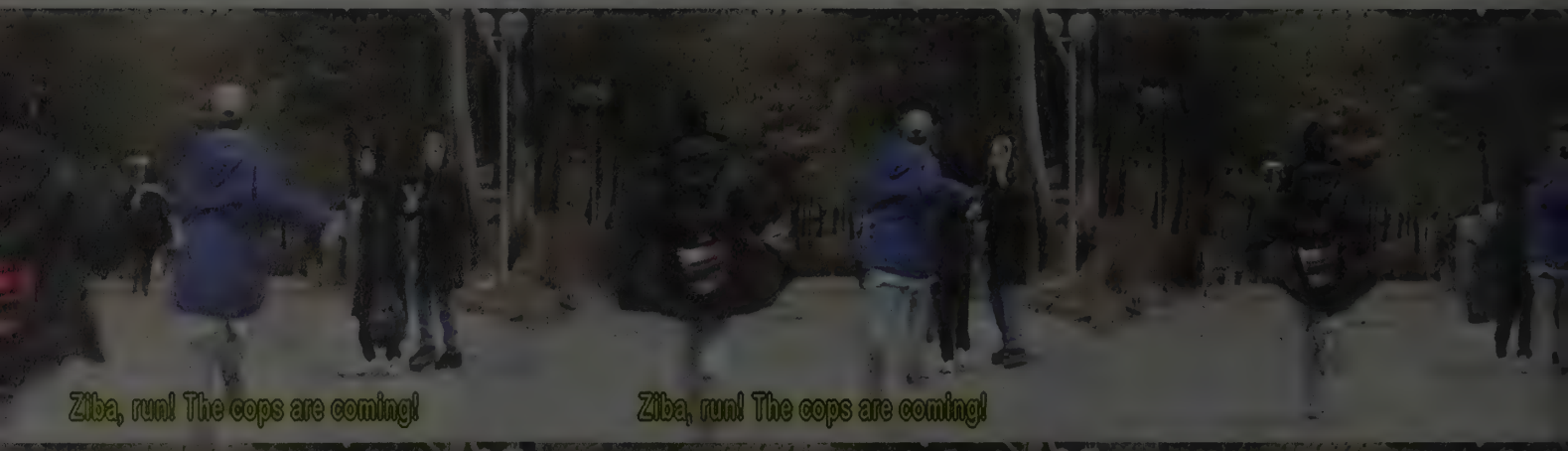
Farman's fate was more clearly defined. Arrested during the early stages of the police operation, he would probably have escaped with nothing more than the broken arm he sustained during his interrogation had he resisted the temptation to gamble. Accepting responsibility for other people's crimes in return for a reward was a normal Island practice. The compensation that the municipality

offered to pay anyone willing to claim ownership of destroyed property must have seemed like a good money-making proposition to a young down-and-out. It was just bad luck that the police had discovered two kilos of heroin and a corpse in the building he applied for. Instantly elevated to the rank of the big-time player he had once aspired to be, he became eligible for exemplary punishment. Seventy executions were initially scheduled, but after public protest and the payment of blood money only five were actually carried out. Although there were many whose crimes made them far more deserving, Farman was chosen. According to Mir-Hashem, his friend believed the police were only trying to scare him right up to the moment that they slipped the noose over his head on 19 March 2001.

The place where Farman lived is still empty, the construction of the sports centre indefinitely postponed by lack of funding. There are rumours of suspicious comings and goings but the only positive evidence of the existence of former inhabitants is a nearby recycling dump. What was once so visible is now, for a time, more-or-less well hidden. Studies suggest there may be 200 places on the margins of Tehran and other Iranian cities where people live in conditions that generate a variety of social ills. This population is set to double in the next ten years.

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakshan Bani-Etemad**

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**



Somayyeh, run!
Somayyeh, run!

Ziba, run! The cops are coming!
Ziba, run! The cops are coming!

Masum, run! Go! Run!
Masum, run! Go! Run!
Masum, run! Go! Run!

Get out of here! Don't stop!
Get out of here! Don't stop!

Frames from *Under the Skin of the City*, 2003 Feature Film **Rakhshan Bani-Etemad**

Masum, wait! Masum?!

A country with a long history of opium use, Iran is a key transit point for opium and heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan. With an estimated two million drug addicts in Tehran, where prostitution and suicide are on the rise, a new drug rehab programme offers methadone and clean syringes to addicts.

Tehran Methadonia

A new drug programme in city parks

'Did you see *Leaving Las Vegas*?' Davud asks me, excited and disgusted at the same time. 'It was such a wild film; he drank so much alcohol, and the scene where she was attacked...' Davud has an open face, usually with a joking grin on it. There is something naïve and soft about him, something sincere.

Had we met at a party in north Tehran or at the university campus, Davud could have passed for any young Iranian thrilled and offended by the wild life of the West. But this is not the case. We are having this conversation in Shoush Street, a notorious area in south Tehran known for crime and homeless drug users roaming in the streets. Davud used to be one himself. A man of thirty, he has been addicted to heroin for ten years, several of which he spent living on the streets. And he thinks *Leaving Las Vegas* is wild? I wonder...

Davud has changed his life recently. He was one of the first heroin users to receive treatment with methadone as initiated by the NGO Persepolis Harm Reduction (PHR) in 2003. Since then, he has worked for the organisation. At five centres in south Tehran, PHR offers free methadone, syringes and medical care to the most destitute drug users. Like Davud, most of the employees are former heroin users now 'converted' to methadone. They form PHR's outreach teams targeting drug users in the streets. Armed with a small folding chair and a first aid kit, two men hand out clean syringes to between fifty and one hundred drug users a day and change the bandages of addicts with infected injection wounds.

Davud's team works in the parks and alleys around the main railway station. We cross a square with a burned-out car turned upside down and reach a small park surrounded by abandoned, roofless houses. The drug users gather here to shoot up, sleep in the dumps and try to keep warm with small fires in the winter. The walls still standing are tainted by smoke, and the ground is covered with used syringes. If you don't watch out it sounds as though you are walking on cockroaches. There is an astonishing smell of urine, rot and death. These parks are 'high risk', the men tell me: 'You have no idea how many people died here.'

Slowly the drug users turn up and collect their daily newspaper wraps with four syringes, disinfectant tissue and small pieces of cotton. When they register, they can also get a metal spoon for heating up the junk. 'But it's private. Don't let anyone else use it!' the outreach workers strongly emphasise. Curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS and the consequences of injecting drugs is their aim. They sometimes comment on the fix as well, having years of heroin experience themselves. 'No, no,' says Mohammad of PHR to a man who begins to shoot up as soon as he grabs the new syringe. 'That needle is too big. Use the other one instead.'

Mainly, the outreach team tries to persuade users to drop the heroin, come to the centre and receive methadone instead. When a nineteen-year-old kid approaches us, still good-looking and fairly well dressed, Davud pleads with him: 'You are so young. Look, I wasted ten years of my life. Don't do the same thing. Get on methadone instead. No, no, you won't have problems sleeping. You will be calm. It's free. You don't have to go and search for drugs all the time. Please consider it!' The youngster usually keeps his cool when receiving the syringes, but Davud's moving persistence affects him; squatting in the street, he nearly starts to cry.

It often takes weeks of persuasion before drug users appear at the centre, but quite a few people have found their way. Every morning 300-400 users, most of them men, line up to collect their methadone on the bare ground floor of a three-storey building. The atmosphere is bustling, at the same time harsh and accommodating. People are restless and in pain; some seem entirely withdrawn and paralysed, while others roam the room, searching for cigarettes or any other kind of relief. They are poor and devastated. Many live on the streets, scraping by through stealing, selling drugs or being prostitutes.

A room of 8m² houses a medical unit with a couch covered by a curtain. A nurse treats acute injuries, and the more severely ill are referred to the hospital. A stained metal box in a corner accumulates used syringes, which the drug users gather in the streets. On the first floor a young female psychologist screens and registers the newcomers. They are provided with an ID card and can receive methadone immediately. PHR provides tea, biscuits and sometimes proper food when it can find a sponsor. It always tries to give the users something, PHR director Bijan Nasirimanesh says. Otherwise the drug users simply starve.

Although the agony and despair of drug use is graphically played out at the centre, it is surely not just a feature of Iran's poor and homeless. The country holds an infamous world record for drug use, and it is widespread among all social classes. Three and a half million people in Iran, or 5 percent of the population, use opium, heroin, crack, ecstasy and hashish. Surely drugs are not a new issue here, but they have become far more common among Iran's huge youth population; the number of people injecting heroin has increased dramatically, to at least 200,000.

There are plenty of reasons for this. Unemployment counts as one, but, especially among the middle and upper classes, people do work while addicted, and a survey showed that 18 percent of all new users in 2003 were introduced to drugs at work. Whether out of despair or curiosity, getting hold of opium and heroin is a lot easier and less expensive than alcohol, due to the tons of opiates smuggled in from Afghanistan.

For an Islamic state this poses a thorny problem, but surprisingly, Iran is adjusting. Although still prohibited and taboo, addiction is being widely discussed. 'Say no to drugs' adverts on national TV depict people dying in the streets, and attempt to scare off the curious. A mushrooming industry of private clinics advertises swift, 'magic' solutions to addiction. Narcotics Anonymous has helped cure 50,000 people in Iran since the mid-1990s, and has its third-largest client base in the world there.

Yet PHR sets the scene for the most destitute individuals. It is the first NGO in Iran that has introduced harm reduction treatment. It does not propose to cure drug users, but by offering syringes and methadone it can reduce the harm done by injecting drugs. With five centres located in south Tehran, PHR attends to around 5,000 drug users. Indeed, it is very far from meeting the demand, but its work is still a major step forward.

In the beginning, PHR operated on an entirely illegal basis, Nasirimanesh recounts with a grin. Its members worked from an abandoned military container, constantly watching out for the police and shutting down whenever they appeared. But the persistence of Nasirimanesh, a doctor from Shiraz and a leading specialist in Iran, has been a primary force in making the government legalise the controversial practice of harm reduction. Things have changed, if only recently.

For nearly two decades after the Revolution, countering the traffic in narcotics from Afghanistan was the only drug policy adopted by the Islamic Republic. More than 10,000 traffickers have been executed since

1979, and at least 3,000 police officers have been killed fighting smugglers along the Afghan border. But no treatment was available. Drug users were treated merely as criminals. The prisons were packed with addicts sharing needles with hundreds of other inmates.

When HIV/AIDS became prevalent in Iran, that scenario proved an overwhelming and embarrassing obstacle to the government, and social realities forced it to make pragmatic compromises. In 1997 the head of the judiciary added an article to the restrictive anti-drugs law, allowing users seeking treatment to be exempted from the law. Drug users could then be regarded as patients and offered treatment. That was a significant step forward, and paved the way for doctors like Nasirimanesh.

However, plenty of political disagreements still exist. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Welfare run treatment facilities and prevention programmes, and insist on a reduction in the demand for drugs. But judicial and law-enforcement officials still favour a 'tough on crime' attitude towards drug users, and 60 percent of all prisoners are incarcerated on drug charges.

NGOs like PHR are caught in the middle of these political battles. Although it is now legal, harm reduction is hardly a risk-free endeavour. PHR does not only fight heroin addiction, it must often still fight with the police. Sometimes the police even show up at the centre, attacking and arresting users there to receive methadone, outreach workers tell me. When I arrive in the morning, a topic of constant discussion is the number of drug users the police have detained the previous night. This is not only due to the fact that many of the addicts deal drugs to support themselves — which is obviously still illegal — but it is primarily caused by sneering doubt among police officials: can providing free methadone and syringes really be called 'treatment'?

One day the police turn up as the outreach team visits the park. They look with suspicion at the unassuming first aid kit and lonely folding chair. On the team that day is Ali, who points to a badge he has quickly put on his chest. 'See! We are an NGO. We offer treatment,' he emphasises. Eventually the officers back off and Ali puts the badge back in his pocket. 'At least I remembered this one today,' he sighs with relief. Even Ali is uneasy with these ongoing conflicts, although he is clearly not a timid man.

Ali is thirty-two years old, tall and muscular with broad shoulders. He wears tight jeans; his beard partly covers a scar, which marks his high cheekbones; he has the eyes of an eagle. At age sixteen he was caught smuggling 40 kilos of heroin and sentenced to twelve years. 'It was only because I was so young that they didn't kill me,' he says with a laugh, mimicking an imaginary loop around his neck. He is the authoritative, relentless storyteller of the team, constantly impressing people with his insights and macho tales, pointing a finger at them for emphasis: '*Miduni chi migam*?' ('Do you know what I'm saying?')

After serving his sentence, Ali continued working as a dealer for a while. But then his priorities changed. He was employed by PHR, got on methadone and was educated as a nurse. He is tough but fair when the drug users put up a fuss, and he scolds those who turn up late with their old bandages. 'Do you see how bad it has become? I told you to come earlier!' he says, putting on a pair of plastic gloves and a hygiene mask before cleaning the wounds. But at the same time, he is the addicts' guardian, protecting them from the police.

When the officers are gone, Ali turns to the streets restlessly, catching up on news and keeping watch. Half an hour later he returns, telling us that three drug users have been arrested buying drugs by undercover detectives posing as dealers. Immediately Ali shouts out to the men camped in the ruins next to the park: 'The police caught someone, get away, hurry up!' They climb the walls of the abandoned buildings and stumble, heads down, through the park.

Tragically, being arrested can also be a blessing. One day, an unusually well-dressed man in his forties arrives. 'Oh, we haven't seen you for a long time,' Mohammad says. 'Where have you been? *Bah, bah,* look at you. I couldn't recognise you.' The man's clothes are spotless, and he has put on weight. His explanation is that he was incarcerated for half a year. People often disappear for a few weeks, then turn up when released. 'Actually, sometimes it's good that they are imprisoned,' Mohammad tells me later in a solemn voice. 'Then, at least, they get food and have a place to stay for those weeks.'

But everyone also knows that being abused, beaten and getting fleas are part of the drill — and that recurring detention solves no problems. Even if users are temporarily forced out of their addiction, soon afterwards they might be back on the streets. 'I'm not bad. I'm clean,' the well-dressed man says, touching his forehead. 'But my mind just can't handle it. It's ruined, it's all wrong.' Mohammad urges him to come to the centre and speak to the psychologist, but the man shrugs his head, thanks Mohammad for the syringes and leaves to buy heroin.

The users all have their reasons for ending up here. In that sense, their destinies are emblematic of the social calamities of Iran over the past decades: the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s; poverty — 10 percent of the population lives below the poverty line; urbanisation and unemployment; bored, restless and resistant youth; domestic violence; prostitution. Lost souls clinging to their dignity gather in these parks.

A man in his fifties addresses me in fluent English with a posh accent. He used to work for the UN and speaks six languages, he loudly, ramblingly insists; he worked as a translator. And yet, this park has become his home. Why? Like numerous others who served in the war he became a POW and was detained for two years in Iraq. After that, his life fell apart. Although he is the only POW I meet, the consequences of the war are echoed in many other narratives. One guy proudly describes how he met Ayatollah Khomeini when returning from the front. They did not use drugs while at war, he says, but many men were left traumatised afterwards, and drugs became an easy way out. Another guy comes from Ahwaz, close to the Iraqi border. Both his parents were killed during the war, and he has been living on the streets since he was a child.

An old man in a wrinkled coat and big, infected bandages says his collapse began with the devastating earthquake of 26 December 2003 in Bam. Twenty-six thousand people were killed when that ancient city was destroyed. He was among the survivors, and was severely injured and rushed to a hospital. But when treated at the hospital he contracted HIV, he says. Now he is suffering from AIDS, living on the streets, cursing the medical system: 'In a government hospital! Can you believe it?'

The young men mainly relate tales of unemployment, migration, boredom and family problems. One of them carries his life in a black plastic bag. He is shooting up when we arrive but, when given a chance to show something of his life before becoming addicted, he interrupts the fix. Out of the bag he drags several pieces of coloured paper along with a pair of scissors. With hands covered in dirt, he swiftly begins to cut out what appears to be a sticker with my name. 'He used to make posters and advertisement boards,' the man next to me explains. 'He is a real artist.' As with most of the other young men, this fast-cutting graphic designer who used to work in the bazaar is now unemployed.

Especially in the southern part of Tehran, urbanisation and the hasty expansion of the city over the last few decades have left a trail of tragedy. Morteza, who works for PHR, comes from the Bakhtiari tribe near Isfahan. He spent his childhood in the mountains as part of a shepherd's family. We make a fire in the park to keep warm while waiting for the drug users to turn up, and he quietly recounts his memories of the countryside, the clear sky and outdoor life, the special scent of making tea over a fire. When he was a teenager, like many other tribal families his parents migrated to the suburbs of Tehran to find work. He had been a wild kid, a *sheitun*, he says, but when they got to Tehran it became worse. He was married early, at age sixteen, to a girl who was only twelve, but they divorced because of his addiction. For five years he was imprisoned for drug dealing and armed robbery. There were plenty of them, he says, the *shahrestans*, people from the provinces who migrate to Tehran in the vain hope of a better future. But with a national unemployment rate of 15 pecent — up to 25 percent among fourteen to twenty-five-year olds — many end up in further poverty and despair.

Most of the outreach workers at PHR speak with difficulty about their pasts, shaking their heads silently. Words come slowly as they tell of imprisonment, abuse, police brutality, friends overdosing or freezing to death. But because of PHR, their future looks remarkably different now, and discussing what lies ahead, describing their hopes, seems both possible and easy. The future has become an option. Being able to make a difference and helping other drug users gives them an unprecedented sense of pride. Getting a small room to live in is a great step forward when you haven't had one. Being a father to your children, or starting a family, is suddenly achievable.

Davud tells me he now wants to get married and have love in his life. He would adore his wife, he adds in a heartfelt voice; he would listen to her and let her decide matters. She would be the head of the house, *reis-e khâneh*. Morteza looks up from his protocol registering the drug users and flashes Davud an ironic and caring smile: 'Don't worry, Davud. Women always are!' Not picking up on Morteza's irony, Davud in turn outlines an elaborate, peace-loving, feminist line of argument, essentially revealing all the agony he has left behind. 'I know it's not easy,' he nods, 'but I really hope it will happen.' Davud is done with his lowlife. He is done with *Leaving Las Vegas*.

Three

Three of us were walking along the pavement. A car pulled up and three people got out. They smelled our breath and left.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

Photo essay and text **Javad Montazeri**

Going Home

Somewhere, somehow, there's been a sea change

The Caspian Sea is my motherland. I was born there, and as I grew up, it shaped my personality. I love it very deeply. I'm still nostalgic about it. During my childhood, my family lived in Noshar because of my father's job. Every Friday, he took me with my two brothers and sister to the beach to swim and relax. My mother stayed at home. I remember those days well. People wore swimsuits; I remember women in bikinis going to the showers after bathing in the sea. Nobody cared about what they had on in the water.

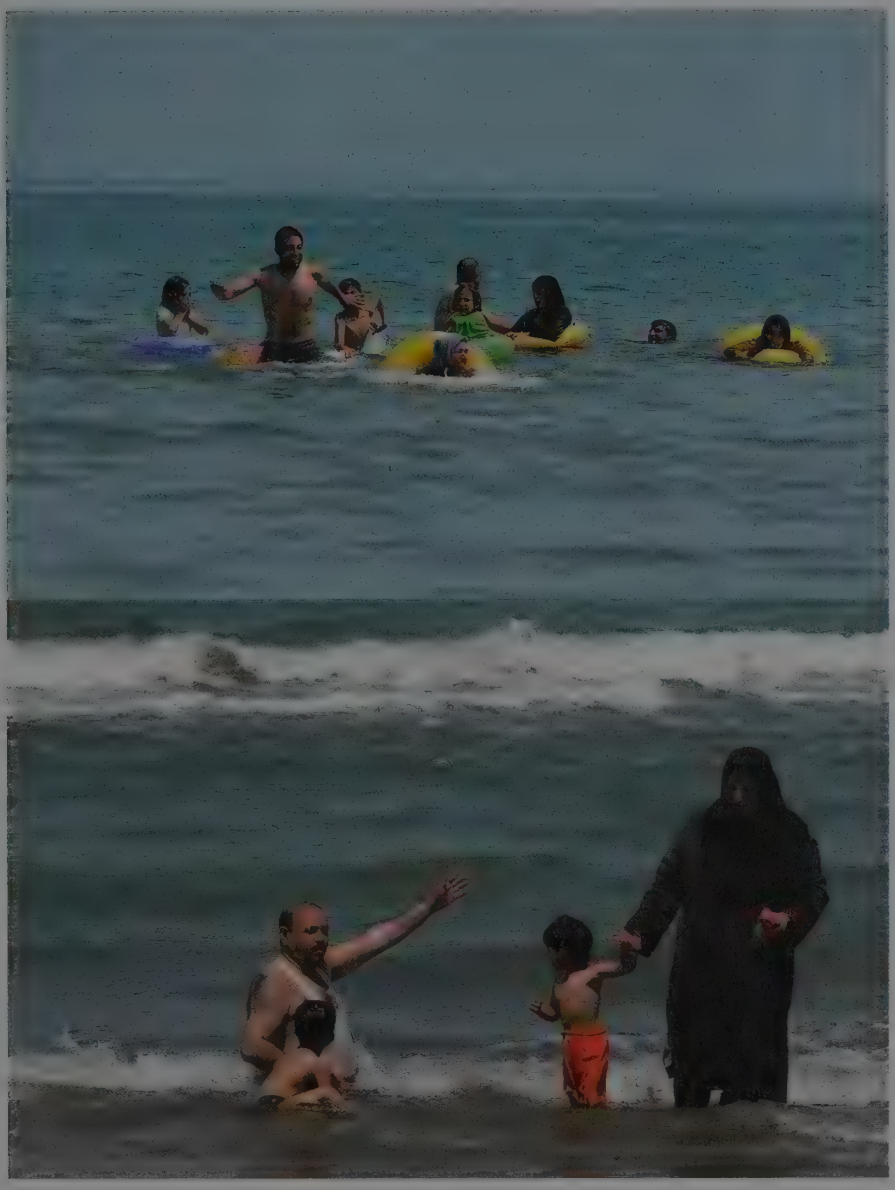
Now the situation is completely different. These pictures were taken thirty-one years later, in the summer of 2006. I took them secretively on the same beach I used to visit as a child. This time I brought my seven-year-old daughter with me. It is a four-hour drive from Tehran, where we now live.

People on the beach thought I was taking pictures of her, but I was focused on something else. At the time I was a little worried. Anyone who knew about photography would have easily seen what I was really doing, because it's impossible to take pictures of your daughter two or three metres away with a 70-200 mm zoom lens and 2.8 diaphragm. For me, it's important to understand what's happening in my country. In two years' time, when my daughter is nine, she will be forced to wear the same clothes the women are wearing in these photographs.

Before the Islamic Revolution, what people wore wasn't important. The change that has taken place didn't evolve naturally. It was imposed on us. In another era, about seventy years ago, Reza Shah, father of the last king of Iran, tried to remove the *hejab* from women — by force. After the Revolution, the Islamic authorities compelled them to put it back on again. Both regimes failed. They altered surface appearances, but people's minds were unaffected. At the same time, their inhumane actions destroyed some of our real culture.

These pictures record life under the special rules mandated by a political regime, but I have my own memories, and have seen how lives change. Society can be altered. It can destroy itself or rise again.

My experiences on the shores of the Caspian bear witness to a small aspect of history's changes, and it is this I hope to document in my photographs.



Pink Cloud

On that cold morning of 23 December 1981, I only wanted to look at the cloud that had turned pink at sunrise. We were climbing a hill in single file and I was looking upwards when suddenly a hail of bullets pierced my chest. I fell on my back; my lungs grew hot and filled with blood; and three minutes later, while still looking at the orange and pink cloud, I died. I never saw the man who had fired at me from behind a rock at the top of the hill. Maybe he was only a twenty-year-old soldier because, if he'd been around a bit, he wouldn't have picked a private from our column, which included three warrant officers and two lieutenants.

My father always hoped that I'd go to Australia like my brother, who's a doctor. But maybe I didn't have the talent for it. At the end of the summer just after I'd finished high school, Tehran's airport was bombed. The war had begun. My mother locked me up in the house for nine months. She used to buy me the paper every day and, now and then, a book. Finally, one day, I'd had enough and arranged to meet Parvaneh[1] in the park. I'd known Parvaneh since our second year in high school and, in our fourth year, we'd promised to remain true to each other forever. She had pretty, orange hair and always wore shiny, copper rouge. In our third year in high school, the last time I ever visited her house furtively in the afternoon, I saw her hair.

I still hadn't given Parvaneh the gift-wrapped bottle of perfume that I'd bought her on the way, nor the letter I'd been trying to write to her during the nine months that I'd been locked up at home, when the volunteer patrols picked us up. While they were making us get into the back of the station wagon, I still didn't understand what was going on. And later I just kept looking at my fingernails so that my eyes wouldn't catch Parvaneh's.

They handed her over to her family with a fuss and took me to a detention centre in the south of the city, but I didn't know exactly where. When they'd made Parvaneh get out of the back of the station wagon in front of her house, one of the neighbours had opened the window and looked at us. The neighbour was still standing there when we left. In my cell, someone had carved a big heart on the wall with something sharp. The heart had turned out a bit lopsided. For two days, I stretched out my legs and looked at the door. In the end, they came and took me to a police station out of town. The station had brick walls topped with barbed wire. There I boarded a bus with a lot of men whose heads had been shaved, and we set off for a training garrison. Sixteen hours later, when we got off the bus in front of the garrison's gate, a sergeant made us line up and then had us run around the garrison so many times that I was still limping a week later. We were all fugitive conscripts. One night, after they'd given us some watery stew, they made us line up again and handed out uniforms that were as loose as sacks.

The last time I saw my mother and father was the moment when the bus went around Freedom Square on the way to the garrison. The two of them were standing by one of the flowerbeds around the square and, when they saw me, they waved. The other soldiers with their shaved heads all waved back at them through the windows. My parents laughed, moved closer and waved at all of us; and we half-rose in our seats and waved back at them. I don't know how they knew our bus would be passing Freedom Square at that time. Five months later, when the bullets pierced my chest, the letter I'd spent nine months writing was still in my trouser pocket. The gift-wrapped bottle of perfume had been taken away from me first thing at the detention centre.

1 Parvaneh, a woman's name, means 'butterfly'.

I stayed for hours next to a dried-up bush that was shaped like a horse's head. Further away, there was a big rock that had a strange green colour. The pink cloud gradually turned orange and then yellow, and then it disappeared altogether. Our column had lost its way deep in enemy territory and, when the bullets were fired at us, no one was able to take me with them back behind the lines. In the afternoon the Iraqis came, put me in the back of a station wagon and took me to a cold storage. They stripped me naked and searched me everywhere. They must have mistaken me for someone else, because they decided not to bury me.

I stayed for four weeks in a big metal drawer, which had a fluorescent lamp on top. Whenever someone opened the drawer, the lamp would switch on. On several occasions, they brought people to have a look at me. Some of them had handcuffs on and some of them didn't. But no one recognised me. They'd all shake their heads and leave. On one of the last few days they brought two other people and put them in nearby drawers. They'd pulled out their fingernails, and their skin was covered with blue spots where they'd been burned. Three days later they took all three of us, in an ambulance with painted-over windows, to a deserted graveyard. None of the graves had gravestones. Our place had been prepared in advance. They threw me into a grave, and two Iranian POWs wearing yellow outfits shovelled dirt onto me. Then they made a mound of dirt that matched my height and lay alongside countless other mounds.

None of the dirt mounds were marked with names. They'd just placed a green plaque with white numbers on each mound. Alongside the nameless graves was a row of thin eucalyptus trees that provided some shade. In his letters, my brother always used to say that Australia was full of eucalyptus trees, and that there were no other Iranians there. On the other side of the trees was a two-storey cement building. The people who occasionally looked out of the windows could probably see the green plaque on each grave. Beyond the graveyard was a big farm, the boundaries of which were visible in the distance in the form of a long, thin line of barbed wire. In the mornings they'd bring people in a lorry to work on the farm and in the afternoons, when they went past the graveyard, there was the sound of disjointed sentences spoken in Persian.

At sunset on the eighty-seventh day, when the shade from the eucalyptus trees stretched over the entire graveyard, three people who were digging fresh graves furtively came to my graveside and planted a tulip bulb next to the metal plaque. It wasn't clear how they'd got hold of a tulip bulb, but they'd clearly mistaken me for that other person again — someone who must have been so important as to make them happy to plant a tulip on his grave. From the next day onwards, the yellow-clad POWs who went to the farm would stare at my dirt mound and, as the lorry drove past slowly, their heads would all turn in that direction.

The tulip bulb gradually grew roots and the green shoot of its stem sprang out of the ground. Seven days later, three Iraqi officers who'd tied their shoelaces around their trouser ankles came and stood over the mound. They pulled out the tulip bulb and even the green plaque. Maybe it was in order to wipe away all signs of the POWs' worshipping ground that they also had bulldozers dig up the eucalyptus trees, root and branch. A mechanical shovel even dug us out of the ground and threw us on top of each other. Throughout this time, shouting could be heard in Persian and Arabic from the direction of the cement building. Finally, they threw us into the back of several lorries using the mechanical shovel. As the lorries set off, they were flattening our now-empty resting places with bulldozers. The fingers of my left hand remained forever under the dirt over there.

The lorries kept going, nonstop, well into the afternoon. Before sunset, we reached a place with high mountains. The lorries parked in the yard in front of an out-of-the-way police station. The walls around the yard had

been whitewashed. The setting sun shone through the station gate, creating a crimson square on the wall. We stayed there for two days, and the crimson square appeared on the station wall each evening. On the morning of the third day, we set off again. The road was steep and rocky. Sometimes we made slower progress than the donkeys that passed along the side of the road. Around noon we reached a deep valley surrounded by tree-covered mountains. They threw us into a long pit shaped like a canal, which had been prepared in advance. Other lorries arrived on the evening of the same day, and they threw some more people on top of us who'd been recently killed by firing squad. Their loose outfits were bloodstained and riddled with holes. Fresh blood was still seeping out of some of them. Then, the bulldozers came and covered the canal with dirt.

The head of a woman with long, light-brown hair that tangled around her face and covered her eyes, fell right on my neck. The thin, white legs of a man had fallen on my chest, and another man's open mouth was stuck to my stomach. My hips, in turn, were lying on the torso of a man whose ribcage had been crushed. This mayhem didn't last very long. Sixty-five days later, a group of soldiers and NCOs came and hurriedly removed the topsoil to find where we were. They had scarves tied around their noses and mouths, and hastily threw us all into the backs of lorries. Maybe someone had revealed the location of our resting place to some organisation or other, and now they had to remove all traces of it. As we set off, the soldiers were filling the long, empty pit with old tires and covering it over with dirt.

That night, as the lorries travelled through mountain passes, there was a pleasant scent in the air. A shepherd on night watch had lit a fire in the mountain's foothills. In other foothills further on, under the moonlight, were rows of beehives. The air was full of insects and the scent of wild plants. If Parvaneh had been there, we wouldn't have slept a wink all night. We'd have lain on a bed with clean sheets and watched glow-by-night bugs as they flew into our room through the open window. A little later, it clouded over and started to rain. I was lying on top of the others and my bones got wet. In the morning, as the sun's rays were just beginning to emerge over the trees on the mountaintop, we reached a place where they were expecting us. The lorries headed down into a valley and a field was revealed in the dim dawn light. Because of the countless holes they'd dug in it, the field looked like a honeycomb.

When the sun rose, men wearing masks threw us into the graves. They hated touching us, and they'd shove us in using long-handled shovels. They also threw another man's hand into my grave. It wore a rusty ring around its ring finger. The dentures of the man who'd been lying next to me in the lorry had fallen out, and one of the soldiers, rushing past, tipped it into my grave with his boot. The dentures had turned black, and they had congealed blood stuck to them. The fingernails on the hand with the ring were black and blue. A little later they tossed in someone else's long leg bone, too. In the middle of it was a small bump, as though it had been glued together there. He must have broken his leg at some point. I'd never had a broken bone myself, because my mother tended to fuss over me and always made sure I stayed away from any dangerous games.

It was obvious that the graves had been dug hastily. The sides of my own had come out all crooked, and it had bumps on the bottom. If they'd dug out just a few shovels-full more, they'd definitely have discovered the ancient graveyard that lay just a few inches lower down. Exactly beneath me, an Assyrian prince lay in his grave, clutching his cast-iron sword to his chest with both hands. If he could have raised it just a little bit, the tip of the sword would have pierced my pelvic bone.

Like the first time I'd been buried, they made a dirt mound the size of my height on top of my grave and stuck a plaque with a few white numbers on

it into the mound. The next day, it started raining, and two weeks later there was grass everywhere. The wild grass dried up, blew away and grew again many times. I stayed there for two thousand, eight hundred and sixty-four days. The roots of wild plants dangled in from the sides of the grave, and the Assyrian prince continued to clutch his sword. One day, some people came with shovels again and opened up the graves. Then they threw us into white sacks and stuck a number on each sack. They loaded up the sacks into a yellow lorry and drove all day. We were going back. We were still in enemy territory, but in the distance there were overcast skies above Iran. When we reached the border, it was dark. At a watch post inside Iran, a few big lorries were waiting for us under big spotlights shining from high up. If my father or mother or Parvaneh had known that I'd be coming back, they'd definitely have been waiting for me there. But there was no one. It was like the bonfire night before New Year when, after we'd collected dry wood for days in advance, it started to rain on the night itself and all the wood got wet. Everyone went home; there was no one left.

They arranged us in rows in the backs of the lorries and took us to the airport. There they put me on a plane, with all my excess weight made up of other people's bones, and then we were airborne. When we landed in Tehran, it was cloudy. They took us to one of the big warehouses at Mehrabad Airport, the same place that had been bombed just after I'd finished high school. They shut the warehouse's big door and took us out of the numbered sacks. The floor was covered with identical-looking coffins, and they carefully arranged us into them. Some people were standing further away, crying. When they finished, they threw a big flag over each coffin and stuck a photograph in front. On my coffin they stuck the photograph of a young man who had a thin moustache. I'd never had a moustache in my life. It was clear that, somewhere in enemy territory, my number had been mixed up.

Soldiers with well-fitting uniforms and crimson aiguilletes lifted the coffins one by one and arranged them in rows in a big, open-air area outside the warehouse. A large crowd had gathered around the area. Many people in it were crying, some holding up framed photographs of young men. My mother and father were not there; there was no sign of Parvaneh either. If I'd had a face, there might have been someone there who'd have recognised me. Many camera-men were coming into the open-air area, which was surrounded by soldiers, and filming everything. Someone stood on a raised platform behind the coffins and delivered a speech to the crowd.

In the middle of the crowd was one familiar face. It was the photograph of a smiling young man with light-brown hair. It was a photograph of me. An old woman with a brown scarf was holding it over her head. It was my mother. It was definitely her. She'd really aged. My father wasn't there. When they'd waved at me in Freedom Square, they had been together. Mother had grown smaller. Father must have died, otherwise she wouldn't have come alone.

Once the speech and the filming were over, they put each of us into a station wagon and headed out of the open-air area. As we drove around Freedom Square, people would occasionally stop near the flowerbeds and look at the fleet of station wagons. They took me to an old house, which had a backyard with a small pool. They'd prepared a bed for me there in advance, and had placed so many pots of geraniums around the bed as to put the bees in a daze. Until night-time, various people would come, rest their foreheads on the coffin, cry and leave. Only one old woman was there the whole time. Her nose had turned red from crying so much. She resembled my mother a bit when she cried. Maybe people all resemble each other when they cry. Every five minutes, she'd get up and kiss a corner of my coffin. But whenever she wanted to open the coffin's lid, a few people would take hold of her and coax her back onto her black leather chair.

The next morning, they put my coffin back into the same station wagon and took me to the top of a beautiful hill outside the city, surrounded by old trees. They'd dug a few big, magnificent graves for us there. When they wanted to put me in my place, they opened the coffin's lid. A few people were still holding back the old woman, but there was no need; she wasn't moving at all. She was staring at the rusted ring on that other person's finger bone. She wasn't even crying.

They buried me with great care and placed a beautiful black stone that matched my height on the grave. On top of the stone they affixed the photograph of the young man with the thin moustache. The old woman was still staring at the gravestone. They'd brought her a chair to sit on. She must have been suffering from rheumatism. Like the day before, a crowd had gathered there, and cameramen were filming everything. There, too, they'd set up a raised platform, and someone was making a speech. It was a cloudy day and the flashbulbs on the cameras shone like lightning in the sky. Then they all left and took the old woman, too.

From here, you can see Tehran in the distance. It's so far-away that I can't find Parvaneh's house. The letter I was trying to write her for nine months might still be in storage somewhere in Iraq. The bottle of perfume was no doubt buried in the rubbish. If Parvaneh ever comes this way on a day out, I'll be able to see whether she still wears shiny, copper rouge or not. It's a good season. Sometimes it's sunny and sometimes it rains. In the sky, there's a cloud that's turned pink on top. An orange butterfly is sitting on a grassy patch with yellow flowers. Now it flits off and goes towards the old trees.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser

Photo essay and text **Mohsen Rastani**

Madam Nasr, from Tehran

The Iranian Family

A tradition of portraiture captures a nation

For me, the word *famil* (family) is synonymous with the process of reviewing my own past. For Iranians, memory means togetherness, expressing the deep connections we have with each other. We can always be ourselves among the other members of our family. Our individual joys and sorrows have taken shape in the presence of others.

The Persian tradition of family portraiture reminds us of our mothers and fathers and keeps them to hand for the next generation. Photographs like these preserve a long history of secret family relationships. They are holy. A photograph makes a person's existence visible and definite, and this is a momentous act. The people in *The Iranian Family* are like myths, carved images on the stone walls of Persepolis.

I have been taking these portraits during my own travels over the past fifteen years. Family life is more vibrant in the villages and small cities. In Iran, if people trust you they'll give you everything they have. In the pictures, I let people present themselves the way they wish, and unconsciously they reveal their whole being. That is why they look so alive, spontaneous and natural.

Whenever I'm travelling, I carry a white backdrop with me. If I'm in one place long enough I may open a studio with fake walls, and photograph people there. Sometimes I meet people in the street, assure them that I don't want to bother them and ask them to call me. People stand easily in front of my camera.

My work is like that of a medical laboratory, taking blood types and registering them. These photos can help people identify themselves if they're lost. They will know who they are, where they stand and where their roots are. The white backdrop is as important as the subjects. It isolates people better in our minds, so they become eternal.

Translated from Farsi by Hengameh Golestan

Today in Iran we are ruled by religious leaders. This man is a different kind of cleric. He is rather flexible in his behaviour and beliefs, and has a logical approach towards everything, especially the young. He leaves them alone. I respect him and that was why I photographed him with his wife and daughters.

These youngsters belong to a rap group in Tehran. But their outfits and makeup didn't last long and they soon went back to their normal life – or at least, that was what they told me when I met them again a few years later.

Mrs Seyhoon is an Iranian grandmother.

These gypsies travel with their significant possessions: a cassette radio player and religious paintings about the Battle of Karbala, including the one on the left with Imam Ali.

From the very young to the old, these Basiji have prepared themselves for holy war. I photographed them to get to know them. They too are members of the Iranian Family.

These armed soldiers are on their way to the front during the Iran–Iraq War.

My first experience with a camera took place in my hometown of Khorramshahr. Because of the heavy bombardments by the Iraqis, men and boys were arming themselves to defend the city. I took memorial photographs of them for their families, before their martyrdom. The woman in my portrait holds a painting of her son killed in the war.

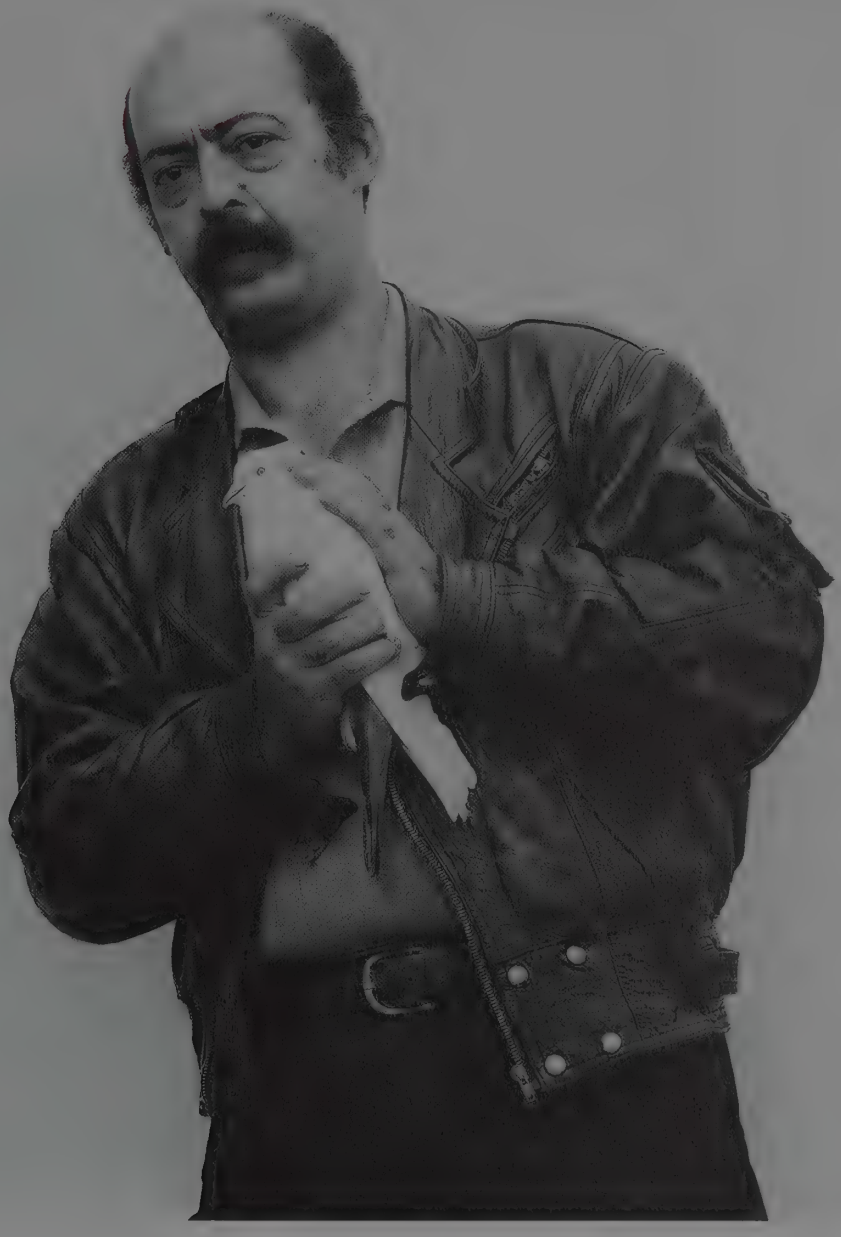
This shepherd boy is from the borderlands between Ardebil and Hashtpar Talesh. His traditional coat has saved him from the cold and wolf attack.

This fellow extracted his own teeth.
An Azeri from Azerbaijan in northwest
Iran, he lives in a village near Tabriz.

The presence of the cow is important to this peasant family from Talesh. It is as dear as a family member.

Women villagers, from the heights of the Alborz mountains, abandoned their homes because of cold weather and insufficient water supply. First I photographed the entire group, including the men, then asked the women to pose by themselves. As these women move further down the mountain, closer to the city, they will give up their traditional dress and wear the *chador*.

This man, a pigeon seller, comes from Qazvin City.



Ladan is from Isfahan.

A Souvenir of Tehran

After you left the city, I was alone. I knew other people, of course, and there was my family, in any case. But then silences seemed longer, and deeper. You said nothing to me after you left, and that rendered my solitude complete, in spite of the many voices surrounding me.

Some mornings I couldn't get up. There was nothing to keep me in bed, but leaving it meant a commitment to experiencing the day. Going out of the house also required preparations, and the thought of that alone stranded me on the vast continent of the bed.

I knew that the best time to run errands was before noon, well before noon, while the air was still passably breathable, but the lethargy that settled upon me was thick and dolorous, and the span of time in the morning when I could convince myself to move was short. I would pull on the long black stockings under my skirt, fasten the many small buttons of my cloak, tie on my scarf, and walk into the hall, which smelled rankly of old flowers and garbage. I pulled the door shut until I heard the lock catch reluctantly. The elevator was slow to come, and I always hoped it would be empty. If I heard voices in the halls above me waiting for its slow descent, I would choose the stairs instead to avoid the closeness of the little lift and the eyes that surveyed me closely, then dismissed me.

In the lobby the doorman and at least one other neighbourhood denizen were sharing tea, sweetening it with the sugar lumps wedged between their teeth. When I entered the courtyard, they would look carefully to see which way I went, they and the men who loitered on the pavement smoking and arguing and the old woman and her daughter. I would always walk a little way down the street before waving for a taxi or turning off onto a side lane. Of course, once you left, I was most often alone, meeting no one and escorted by no one. And I know they remarked on that, too.

When I wasn't out, I would stay inside and watch the television. Everyone spoke quickly and I would try to write down words I didn't understand. The state news was tedious and I tired of the anxious musical riff that introduced it. I preferred several serials that were showing at the time. One featured a young man who had married his cousin just before she was abducted for organ harvesting. She had been kidnapped along with a group of other youths whose organs (we later found out) had been sold on the black market in Europe. I liked the young man. He was, like me, desperate. Earnest, too, with a touching little beard and sad eyes. I sympathised with him as he went from place to place, asking about his lost wife-cousin. *Bichareh.* His uncle, his wife's father, was in on the scheme. The villain controlling the whole business was a man in a safari suit with a white ponytail. He was familiarly and unmistakably evil, and I enjoyed him. There was another serial I liked less, about an office where a magazine was produced. The actors were always crying, badly. It was a comedy.

Sometimes I would stand by the window and look down at the pool in the back courtyard. The water looked clean and cool, and it shimmered bluely in the afternoon heat. It was full of young men and boys wearing bathing trunks, jumping in and out of the water and laughing. I envied them. Even inside the

apartment I felt I should be clothed: the sheer curtains and wide windows made the place a shoe box diorama in which I acted out the life of a native foreigner. The view of the mountains from all of the windows, at first such a pleasure, grew oppressive. They were too near, too plain, too similar. I knew that beyond them was the north, and greenness, but there was no hint of it on the dun-coloured slopes that gave back the heat like a mirror.

When I did go out, I went to the café or to the bazaar; or else to make a visit. For this last, things were required of me, typically the purchase of flowers or sweets. The flower shop was near the patisserie, and if I didn't know which was more appropriate to the occasion, I would buy both. Gifts for visits were governed by a system I did not understand, and buying both was probably insulting, worse than just taking the wrong thing. I counted on the American sense of largeness to be charming. It got to me, the need to buy these gifts; the embarrassment of buying the wrong thing; never knowing how to be, or what to do. If you had been here, we would have laughed about it. Without you, I made of it what I could, and tried not to take it too badly when I made mistakes. Which was often.

But even after you were gone, I enjoyed the flower shop. No. That's not true. I enjoyed it even more after you were gone. It was like you, cool and humid. The black stone floor was always damp from the water used to fill the plastic pots and the air was heavy with perfume. There were familiar sorts of flowers — roses, some lillies and the like — but also strange pods and buds that looked as if when they opened there would be not a blossom but some exotic variety of insect.

I would walk through the place slowly. The flowers in cellophane boxes were what I liked best. Beautiful and dead, they were encased in glass coffins for viewing like princesses in fairy tales, intended to arouse passion. They were elegantly wrought and laid in the boxes like babies, sometimes on nests of wreathed greens or smaller flowers. There were small boxes, containing just a few orchids or a lily, and large ones that were bigger than a bread box. People seemed to like receiving these boxed flowers best — they would exclaim over them and place them prominently in the receiving hall or sitting room. My father always said that my taste in arrangements was extravagant, but he paid for them anyway. By this time, he, too, was an American.

They didn't know how to think of me in the shop. They knew I was foreign, but from where? My overly formal Persian puzzled them. They waited on me quizzically, studying my features for a sign and tolerating my inability to make a decision quickly. I considered the freesias, leaned over the tuberoses, longed after the boxed flowers. Sometimes I would choose one thing and let them begin to wrap it, only to change my mind for another. The men who worked there were uniform, lank and slim, two days unshaven, and clothed in baggy trousers and loose shirts. They seemed alert but exhausted, as did the owner of the shop, who said little and sat behind his desk in the back of the shop all day, holding a small glass of tea lengthwise between two fingers and watching the television in front of him. He never offered me any, nor suggested I sit down. And so I would stand and wait.

After you were gone, the days were long, and I passed them as best I could. The sheets roiled without your body to soften and cool them, and the bed became an island on a sea of carpets, from which I would contemplate the bathroom. Entering it in the morning meant showering, meant accepting that the day had begun and would continue. The room became a box through which I was sure I could be seen by the outside but was powerless to move, to change the curtains, to do anything to make things other than what they were. I simply waited for you to come back like so many cut flowers arranged on the rumpled sheets.

Photo essay and text **Thomas Dworzak / Magnum**

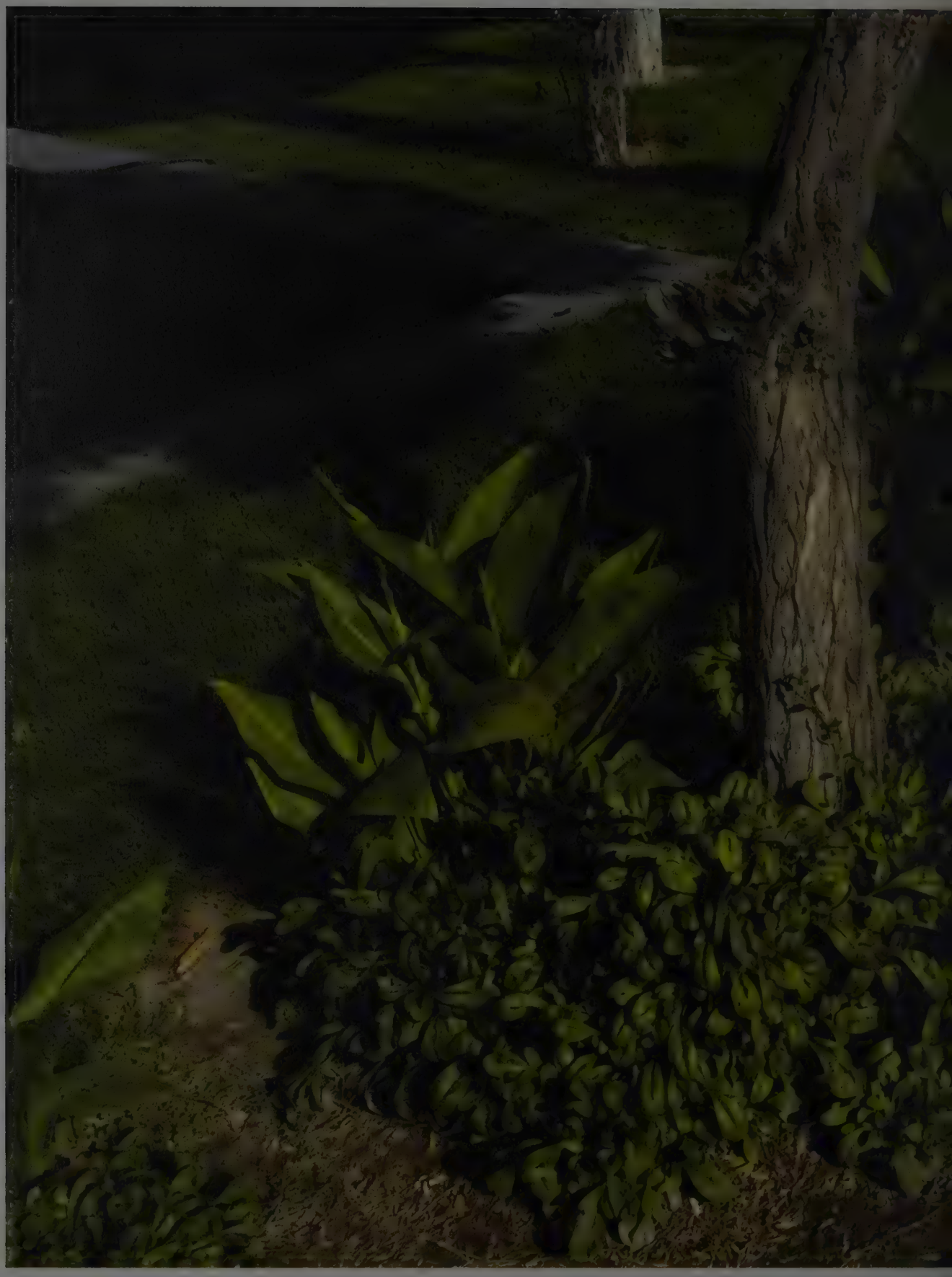
Vali Asr

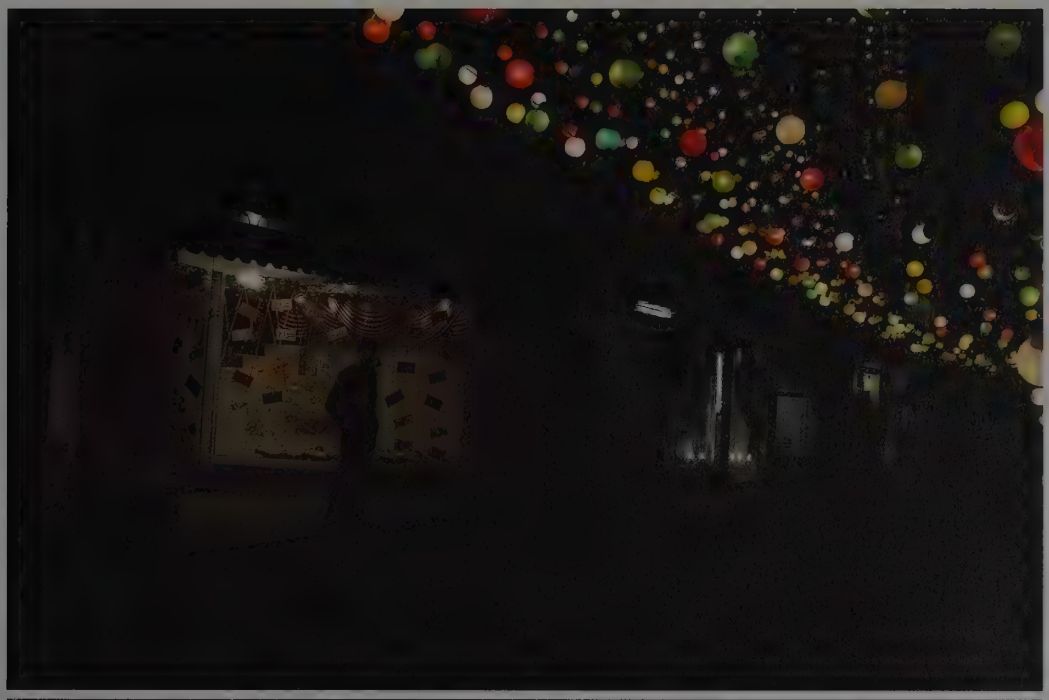
The longest street

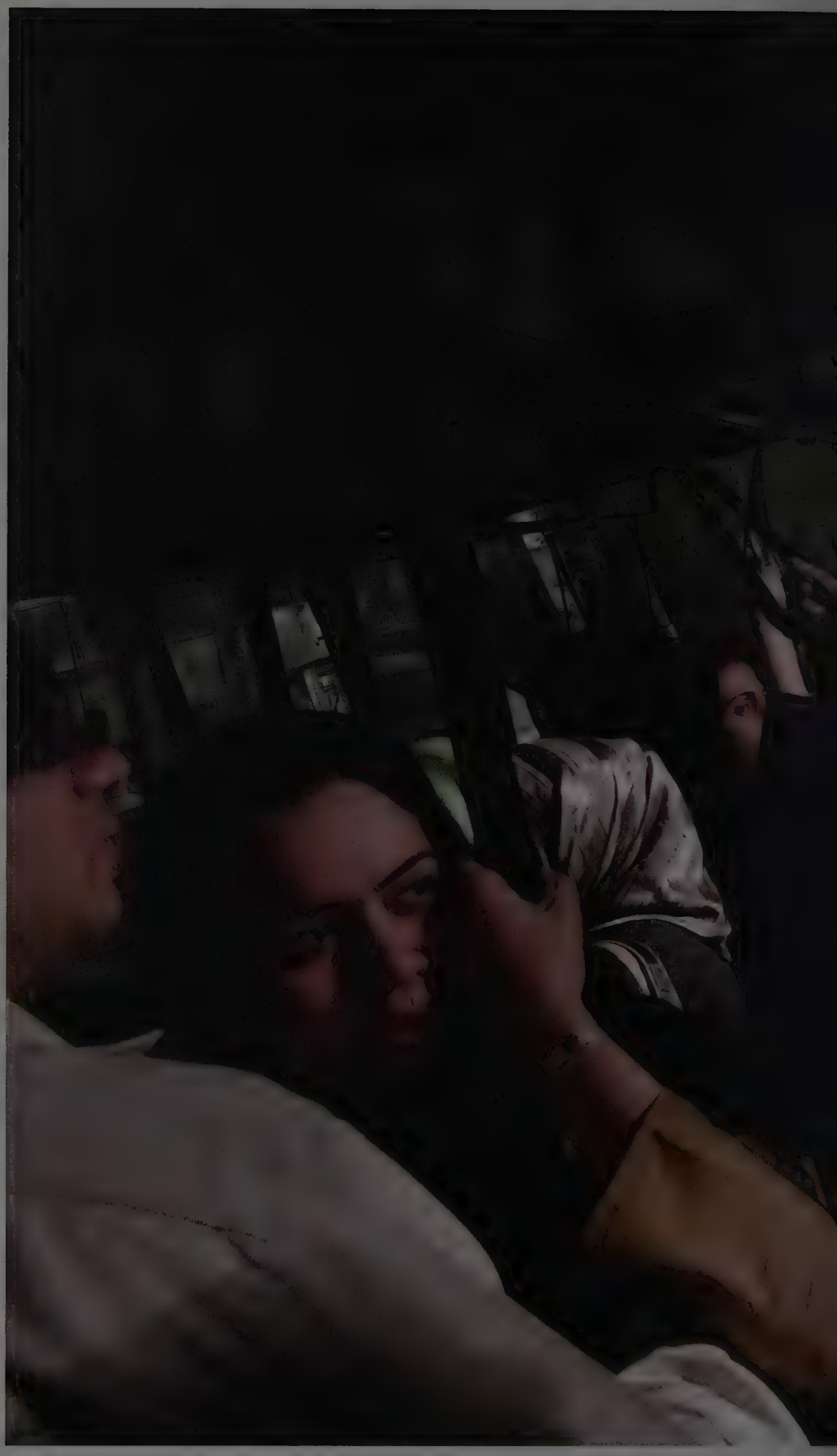
Vali Asr Avenue stretches for about twenty kilometres from the train station in southern Tehran to Tashrish Square in the north of the city, going up in altitude almost one kilometre along the way.

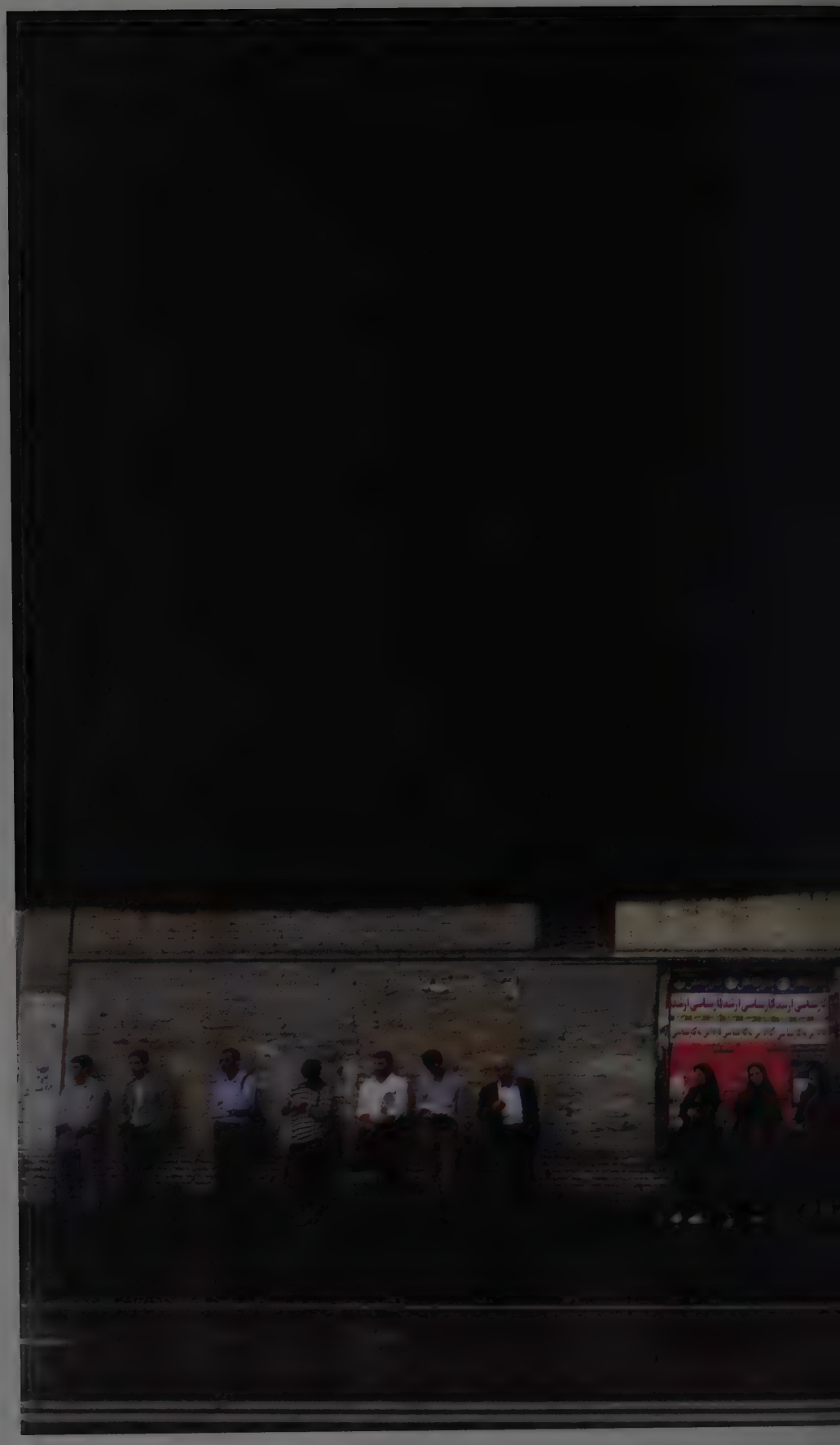
Historically, it has been Tehran's most important avenue. Called Pahlavi Avenue under the Shah, briefly named Mossadegh Avenue after the 1979 Revolution, it is now named after the twelfth and last Imam, the Shi'i Messiah, who will appear at the end of the world.

All the divisions and main aspects of current Iranian society are exemplified alongside Vali Asr. The south/north traditionalist-modern contradictions are concentrated along the avenue. Beginning from the train station, the mosques, *madrassas*, and the Government Complex are positioned alongside the avenue. Political demonstrations take place there and among the busy shopping centres, before moving on to the more modern northern end. There, disillusioned youth have illegal parties and hang out, before heading off away from Tashrish Square to get some degree of freedom in the mountains above Tehran.









Heads of State and Public Officials

Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar (1742–97) was the founder of the Qajar Dynasty. By 1785, he had established Tehran as the country's capital. Previously, Shush, Hamadan, Tabriz, Ardebil, Esfahan (Isfahan) and Shiraz had served as capitals at various times and under various dynasties.

Nassereddin Shah (1831–96) had a map drawn up for Tehran, determining its boundaries. He was the first Shah (king) to travel from Tehran to Europe in the 1870s. He brought back European institutions such as a postal service, railways, electricity and a council of ministers (cabinet).

Amir Kabir (1807–1852) was the chancellor (prime minister) under Nassereddin Shah, who built ■ canal from Karaj to Tehran to supply the capital city with water, as well as the first state-run hospital in Tehran. A census and a smallpox immunisation campaign were among the other legacies of his short time as chancellor.

Mohammad Mossadegh (1882–1967) was the prime minister who made Tehran a household name across the world when he reclaimed Iranian oil from the British and became the hero of nationalism in the Middle East. In 1953 he was toppled in an Anglo-American-planned coup. Although he is best-known for nationalising Iranian oil, Tehran's piped water system is also part of his government's legacy.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89) started his political struggle against the Shah in 1963 and was then jailed. Thousands of people came out into the streets of Tehran to protest his detention. The government was forced to declare martial law and he was sent into exile. When he returned to Iran in 1979, a million people lined the streets to welcome him back and he became the head of state in Iran's first republic. Ten years later, three million people took part in his funeral procession in Tehran.

Mayors

Issa Vazir was Tehran's first mayor. He brought a Frenchman to draw a detailed map of Tehran and many of Tehran's districts were named after his wives. He also had a map drawn of Tehran's tramway system.

General Tahmasebi was the first military man to become mayor of Tehran under Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1920s. He forcibly destroyed all the structures that were a legacy of the Qajar Dynasty. He built new streets and paved streets for the first time. He did away with the tramway system.

Gholamreza Nickpey was the first Tehran mayor to be jailed in office. He was subsequently executed during the Revolution in 1979. The preparation of ■ comprehensive and technically rigorous map of Tehran and the delineation of the city's boundaries were among his achievements. He also established mayoral protocol and created think tanks to consider the city's future.

Gholamhossein Karbaschi was Tehran's mayor from 1988–98. He presided over the city's renovation in the destructive wake of the Iran–Iraq war. He issued permits for high rises to be built in Tehran, thereby totally changing the face of the city. He is often criticised for this action. He wanted to become president but he was sent to prison.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (born 1956) was Tehran's most traditional and religious mayor from 2003–05. Instead of planning modern city spaces, he wanted to turn each of Tehran's squares into a burial ground for 'a martyr who had fallen for Islam'. He began doing this by having some soldiers' remains buried on several university campuses. He used municipality funds for religious ceremonies and for wedding loans to young people. It was from this post that he launched his election campaign and became the sixth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in 2005.

Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf (born 1961) was elected the city's mayor by Tehran City Council in 2005, the same year he stood as a candidate in the Iranian presidential elections. A former commander in the Revolutionary Guards Corps Air Force, he was also a police chief, known for reforming the police after the 1999 student demonstrations.

Foreign Heads of State

Amanalloh Khan (1892–1960) was an Afghan king who arrived in Tehran, along with his queen, in 1922 on his way back from a journey to Europe. The queen was in modern garb and did not wear the *hejab*. They were the first foreign king and queen to visit Tehran.

Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), the Soviet leader, came to Tehran in 1943 to take part in a conference held by the Allied heads of state to discuss how the war would end and what the world would look like after the war. He was the first leader of a world power to visit Tehran.

General Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) was the leader of the Free French and the founder of the Fifth Republic. He was the first military leader of ■ foreign country to visit Tehran during World War II. In 1963, when he visited Tehran as the French president, he was welcomed with great pomp and ceremony.

Sculptors and Painters

Kamalolmolk (Mohammad Ghaffari) (1847–1939) was the first great Iranian painter to be familiar with the history of European art. He drew the most acclaimed portraits of Iranian courtiers and statesmen in the late nineteenth century. His paintings of Nassereddin Shah are now among the most important and most priceless works in Tehran's Royal Museum.

Morteza Momayez (1935–2005) was the country's first influential graphic artist who became known as the father of Iranian graphic design starting in the 1970s. Apart from the thousands of paintings and canvases that are his legacy, he designed some of the country's best-known logos for banks, cars and big state bodies. He started teaching at the Faculty of Fine Arts at University of Tehran in 1969 and added hundreds of Iranian graphic artists to the profession. It has been said that he changed the way Iranians look at the things around them.

Parviz Tanavoli (born 1937) is the greatest Iranian sculptor. He has bequeathed his lasting sculptures to Tehran Municipality and his best-known works are on display in public venues in Tehran. They include a sculpture of Shirin and Farhad (the Iranian equivalent of Romeo and Juliet), now placed at the entrance of Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art.

Zahra Rahnavard was the first religious woman sculptor to have a work, entitled *Mother*, installed in a public square in Tehran. She is also the first woman to have served as the chancellor of one of Tehran's universities (Al-Zahra University).

Henry Moore (1898–1986) was the great twentieth-century sculptor who produced the most expensive sculptures of the last quarter of the century. Famous works by him remained on display in the garden of Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art throughout the revolutionary years and thereafter. He is the only world-famous sculptor whose works have survived in Tehran.

Architects

Me'mar-Bashi (Sane'i) built the Iran Baastaan (Ancient Iran) Museum and the Marmar (Marble) Palace with green stones from Yazd Province, which rank among the most lasting and most admired structures of the Reza Shah period and the best-known buildings in the city.

Kamran Diba (born 1937) built Shafaq Park (in the Yusef-Abad District), the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Carpet Museum, which ranks among Tehran's postmodern buildings and is a legacy of a period that has become known as Tehran's golden age.

Houshang Seyhoon (born 1920) designed the archway over the University of Tehran's main entrance as well as the city's twenty-year comprehensive urban plan. He was the chancellor of the University of Tehran's Faculty of Architecture. An excellent pen-and-ink artist, his best works focus on Tehran in the early twentieth century.

Abdolaziz Farmanfarmaeean was an outstanding architect who, with the US firm Gruen Associates, was instrumental in bringing modern American town planning to Tehran in the 1960s. He designed and built many big state-owned structures, including an Olympic village and a 100,000-seat football stadium that, thirty years later, is still unparalleled in the Middle East.

Hossein Amanat (born 1942), as the twenty-four-year-old architecture student who came first in his class at the Faculty of Fine Arts, won the contest that allowed him to design a monument in honour of Mohammad Reza Shah, now known as Azadi (Freedom) Monument.

Women

Fakhr-Afaq Parsa was the first woman to establish a popular civil association for women, *Jamiat-e Zanan Vatankhah* (Association of Patriotic Women), and in the 1920s founded ■ publication in support of women's liberation, as ■ result of which she was sent into internal exile in Qom.

Qamarolmoluk Vaziri (1905–59) was the first woman to appear on stage and sing before ■ public audience in modern clothes, without the *hejab*. This caused a sensation in Tehran at ■ time when women were not allowed to appear in public without a head covering anywhere in the country. The venue where the concert was held was preserved for years and ranked among Tehran's historical sites.

Farah Diba (born 1938) was Mohammad Reza Shah's wife and regent, and the first and last woman to have ■ coronation in Tehran. When the Shah chose her as his future wife in 1959, she was at university, studying architecture in Paris. During her time as queen, the Carpet Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, several parks, the *Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-ye Kudakan va Nojavanan* (Centre for Cultivating the Minds of Children and Adolescents), and the Tehran International Film Festival were among the institutions that Tehran acquired under her tutelage.

Farrokhru Parsa (1922–80) was the first Iranian woman minister and the only woman minister to be executed. She was a well-known educationalist and worked as ■ teacher and the headmistress of ■ secondary school before being appointed as deputy culture minister. When women acquired the right to vote and be elected as a result of the Shah's reforms (known as the White Revolution), she became ■ minister in Amir Abbas Hoveida's cabinet.

Sima Kuban was a writer and researcher who set out to draw ■ comprehensive map of Tehran. She founded a journal named after the city, and although *Tehran* did not survive very long and was banned after six issues, the research articles that were published in the journal on land ownership and the city's groves and bazaars have endured as some of the most authoritative sources for Tehran historians.

Sportsmen

Gholamreza Takhti (1930–68), who was born in Tehran, was the best-loved sportsman in Iran's history. Having started his life in poorer southern Tehran, he rose up to become the world's wrestling champion. He was ■ member of the Iranian national and Olympic teams for fifteen years. Two years after he was banned from sports and social activities, he committed suicide in 1968. His funeral procession was one of the best-attended events Tehran has ever seen and huge crowds came into the streets to pay their respects.

Mohammad Nassiri (born 1945) grew up in the Tehran Municipality's orphanage. It was from there that he became a champion weightlifter. He was the first Iranian to break the record to become the world's lightweight weightlifting champion in 1968 and his record remained unbroken for twenty years.

Hamid Shirzadegan (1941–2007) was the first Iranian sportsman to find his way into a foreign team. He was ■ member of the national Iranian football team and the Shahin Football Club. He was known as the man with the golden foot in Iranian football. Along with three other footballers who hailed from Tehran – Hossein Kalani, Homayoun Behzadi and Parviz Qelichkhani – he was part of the Iranian national side which dominated football in Asia in the late 1960s early 1970s.

Artists and Poets

Mirzadeh Eshqi (1883–1924) was Tehran's emotional and revolutionary poet. He criticised the powerful in his poems, as well as focusing on social issues. Clerics, courtiers and wealthy people were also not spared criticism in his poems. He was assassinated in 1924. Word has it that he was killed on the orders of Reza Khan who held the reins of power at the time but had not yet become king.

Mahvash (died 1960) was a singer whose audience were the ordinary people of the streets and alleyways. She was considered the Iranian version of Edith Piaf. Until her death in 1960, she was Iran's most popular artist. She started out by singing in Tehran's cafés. But, by the time she died, she was so well-known that her funeral procession was massively attended.

Badi'zadeh (1901–79) sang popular songs – he was the Iranian equivalent of Charles Boyer – with lyrics that were about everyday things, such as broken-down buses and bumpy roads. In the absence of radio and television, before modern media existed, the people knew his songs by heart and sang them to themselves.

Mohammad Ali Sepanlu (born 1941) has been called 'Tehran's street-roaming poet'. Most of his poems are about the city and he has ■ collection entitled *Tehran*. Shahrzad, his daughter who is a singer in Los Angeles, has some songs about homesickness and longing for Tehran, which are among her best-selling numbers.

Forough Farrokhzad (1935–67) was Iran's first great feminist poet. She made a film entitled *Khaneh-ye Siah* (The House Is Black) to international critical acclaim. In the 1950s and 1960s, she wrote free verse at a time when Iranian poets had only recently broken free of the rhyme and metre of traditional poetry, and she rose rapidly to become one of the country's top four poets. She died in 1967, after her car swerved to avoid hitting a minibus filled with school children and crashed into an electricity pylon. In one of her poems, she revealed that she was born in central Tehran.

Googoosh (Fa'eqeh Atashin) (born 1949) was born to ■ magician-acrobat father and an artist mother. She started singing and performing on stage when she was ten, and has been Iran's most popular singer for nearly half a century. Incredibly popular among Tajiks and Afghans, who share a language with Iranians, she is the most successful artist from Tehran. With the advent of the Islamic Revolution and the ban on woman singers, she fell silent for twenty years. Then, she left the country and began performing for Iranians abroad. Googoosh also played parts in eight films, though none of these have had the same impact as her songs.

Filmmakers

Ali Hatami (1944–97) was a filmmaker, screenwriter and art director who focused on contemporary history. Hatami began his career in 1969 with the first Iranian musical. He is also known for a TV mini-series about the life of Nassereddin Shah *(Soltan-e Sahebgharan)*, with most of the instalments filmed in the Arg and Golestan Palace. He built a film set depicting an entire city for another series, which was also devoted to well-known Tehran figures. The set is now one of the city's scenic sites. His films include *Kamalolmok*, *Haji Washington*, *Delshodegan*, *Maadar* and *Sattar-Khan*.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf (born 1953) is a director and a writer of short stories. He was jailed as a youth under the Shah and was freed with the victory of the 1979 Revolution. He began his career with religious films but, after a short time, he changed track and started making films that have won many prizes at international film festivals. His two daughters, Samira and Hana, and his wife are also in the filmmaking business and make well-known films. His best-known works include *Bysical-Raan* (The Cyclist), *Dastforush* (The Peddler), *Arusi-ye Khuban* (Marriage of the Blessed), *Shabha-ye Zayandeh-Rood* (The Nights of Zayandeh River), *Nassereddin Shah Aktor-e Cinema* (Nassereddin Shah Cinema Actor) and *Salaam Cinema*.

Abbas Kiarostami (born 1940) is a director and screenwriter. His films include *Gozaresh* (Report), *Mashq-e Shab* (Homework), *Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast* (Where is the House of My Friend), *Ta'm-e Gilas* (Taste of Cherry) and *Zir-e Derakht-e Zeytun* (Under the Olive Tree). He won the Palme d'Or for best film for Taste of Cherry at the fiftieth Cannes International Film Festival in 1997 and was chosen by the United Nations to make a film about AIDS in Africa. He has won dozens of international awards.

Thinkers/Intellectuals

Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–69) was a short story writer, journalist, social critic and angry intellectual. Although born in Taleqan, most of his short stories are related to Tehran, where he wrote and taught. He founded the *Kanoon Nevisandeganeh Iran* (Authors' Association) in protest at a Congress of Writers in which Empress Farah Diba, the last Iranian queen, intended the gathering of intellectuals to show their affinity with the royal court. He is one of the few Iranian intellectuals who continued to enjoy praise after the Revolution. A street and a school have been named after him. His writings include *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication), *Khianat-e Roshanfekran* (Intellectuals' Treachery), *Seh-Tar* (Lute) and *Zan-e Ziadi* (Unwanted Woman).

Ali Shariati (1923–78) was a sociologist, writer and public speaker who became known as 'the teacher of the Revolution'. He was a student in Paris in the heady days of the 1960s and, influenced by the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon, he offered young Iranians a new reading of Islam, which earned him a spell in prison on return to Iran. Hosseinieh Ershad, a cultural-religious centre made in the heart of Tehran in 1964, became the main venue for his public talks. The Shah's secret police closed the centre in 1972 and sent Shariati himself to jail. Dozens of his speeches were turned into books by his students and were read eagerly by budding young revolutionaries. In more recent years, one of Tehran's main streets bears his name and he is spoken of with respect, but traditional clerics do not like his ideas and consider some of them heretical.

Military Men

Reza Khan (1878–1944) (later, Reza Shah Pahlavi), a Cossack colonel, was the commander of a regiment when he staged the 1921 coup in Tehran. It was in Tehran, too, that he launched a movement for republicanism and, when he was defeated, he became king in 1925. His coronation was held in Tehran and he later abdicated as the troops of Russia and Britain, the two world powers, marched into Tehran in 1941.

Haj-Ali Razmara (died 1951) was the first military man to become prime minister after Reza Khan. He had big plans, but was assassinated by religious zealots in Tehran. He had undergone his military training at Saint Cyr in France and was one of Iran's best-educated military men.

Mehdi Rahimi (died 1979) was Tehran's last chief of police and martial law commander when Prime Minister Dr Shapur Bakhtier resigned and the army withdrew its troops from Iranian streets on 12 February 1979, ■ date that has become known as the Victory of the Revolution. It has been said that Rahimi was the only official who remained loyal to the monarchy to the end. He was the revolutionaries' first prisoner, and three days later, he was taken, along with three other military men, to the rooftop of Ayatollah Khomeini's residence and put to death by firing squad.

Hossein Fardoost (died 1987) was ■ childhood friend of the last Shah. He was the highest-ranking military man to stay in the country after the Shah left and he proposed that the armed forces should remain neutral in the face of the revolutionaries. The Shah accused him of having cooperated with the revolutionaries. However, in 1985, he was arrested, imprisoned and three years later, died in prison.

Clergymen

Ayatollah Mohammad Tabatabaei-Sanglaji (1879–1920) was one of the three senior Shi'i clerics who were involved in the Constitutional Movement of 1908 and the only one who was born in Tehran. The Constitutional Revolution began and bore fruit with him centre stage. During the attack on the new parliament *(Majlis)* by cannons, he was beaten and lashed by the Cossacks. While Sheykh Fazlollah Nuri was executed and Seyyed Abdollah Behbahani was assassinated, he survived longer than the others and witnessed the effects of the Constitutional Revolution.

Ayatollah Ahmad Khansari (1870–1963) was Tehran's last grand ayatollah. He was in charge of the city's seminary and endowments for many years. Tehran's flourishing bazaar obeyed his religious guidance and instructions. But from 1952 onwards, he withdrew from political life.

Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabatabaei (1890–1964) was the first cleric to become head of government, although, immediately after being appointed prime minister, he abandoned cloak and turban and opted for civilian clothes. He was a newspaper director with close links to the British embassy. It was in this way that he became the recipient of a military order issued by General Ironside and entered Tehran along with Reza Khan. And it was through the resulting coup that he became prime minister. Three months later, he was sent into exile in Palestine, returning twenty years later. There were frequent rumours that he would become prime minister again but he never did.

Mohammad Taqi Falsafi (1908–92) was a great preacher who played a big role in the political events of the period during which Iranian oil was reclaimed from the British. His sermons used to draw thousands-strong crowds. After the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh, he and the head of the army chief of staff took charge of an anti-Baha'i movement. Later, he was a supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and this was why, after the 1979 revolution, he rose in rank and became the head of the country's preachers.

Aleksandr Griboedov (1795–1829) was a playwright (and a nephew of the great Russian poet Pushkin), who came to Tehran to procure overdue payments after Iran was defeated by Russia and was forced to pay war reparations in addition to losing large swathes of land. The proud young Russian officer was set upon by a mob – incited by a cleric – and torn to pieces at the residence of the Russian emperor's envoy.

Polkovnik V. Liakhov (1889–1919) served as a military adviser to Mohammad Ali Shah during the Constitutional Revolution from 1905–11. On the orders of the Shah, he had cannonballs fired at Iran's young *Majlis)*, which was still in its first parliamentary term, and imposed martial law. Despite the constitution, he declared that the Shah was the only decision-maker on state affairs. Later, when the Shah sought refuge in the Russian legation, Liakhov sent his sword to the constitutionalists and surrendered.

Major C.B. Stokes was a military attaché at the British legation in Tehran. On the day when cannonballs were fired at the *Majlis*, he, like all the other legation staff, was at the embassy's summer quarters in Qolhak (north Tehran). As soon as he heard the news, he returned to Tehran and, on his own initiative, gave refuge to some of the most distinguished constitutionalists whom the Shah intended to kill (including Hassan Taqizadeh, the famous young *Majlis* deputy who hailed from Tabriz, and Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, a satirist and the man behind the first Persian dictionary).

General Sir Edmund Ironside (1880–1959) was the commander of the British forces deployed around Russia. When the 1917 October Revolution broke out, his forces, which were scattered around Qazvin and northern Iran, were ready to go to the aid of Tsarist Russia. After he was ordered by London to recall all British forces, he busied himself with the organisation of new governments for the countries from which British troops were departing. It was he who chose Reza Khan to lead the 1921 military coup against the reigning Qajar king.

General Robert Huyser (1924–97), deputy commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), arrived in Tehran in the final months of the monarchy to prevent modern American weaponry from falling into the hands of the revolutionaries. He also organised the departure from Iran of 60,000 US military personnel and their families. While the Shah imagined that the general was a superman who had come to save the monarchy, Huyser fled the country – using an airport to the south of Tehran – two nights before the Victory of the Revolution and escaped the clutches of the revolutionaries.

Translated from Farsi by Nilou Mobasser
The Who's Who is not a comprehensive list. Apologies for any omissions.

1 Darband
2 Tajrish Square
3 Niavaran Palace
4 Niavaran Park
5 Ghaytarieh
6 Elahiyeh
7 Vali Asr Street
8 Darakeh
9 Evin Prison
10 Vanak Square
11 Lavizan Forest
12 Shariati Avenue
13 Tehran University Dormitory
14 Sepah Shopping Centre
15 Fatemi Crossroads
16 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art
17 Vali Asr Square
18 Tehran University
19 Revolution Square
20 Republic Square
21 Republic Avenue
22 Takhte Jamshid Avenue
23 US Embassy
24 Mofatteh Avenue
25 Shariati Avenue
26 Ferdowsi Square
27 Enghelab Avenue
28 Imam Hossein Square
29 17 Sharivar Square
30 Lalezar Avenue
31 Independence Square
32 Bahrestan Square
33 Sepah-Salar Mosque
34 Parliament (Majlis)
35 Imam Khomeini Square (Toop Khaneh)
36 Theatre Shahr
37 British Embassy
38 Iran Baastaan Museum
39 Ferdowsi Street
40 Post Gate (Darwazeh)
41 Hassan Abad Square
42 Golestan Palace
43 Shams-ol Emareh Clock Tower
44 Baazar
45 Shoush Street
46 Naziabad
47 Shahr-e No
48 Main Train Station
49 Khazaneh
50 Aliabad
51 Shah Abdol Azim Shrime
52 Mehrabad International Airport
53 Freedom Square
54 Freedom Stadium
55 Towards The Imam Khomeini International Airport
56 Towards Beheshet-Zahrah Cemetery

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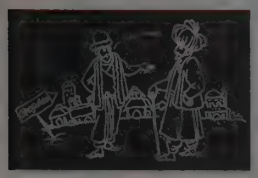
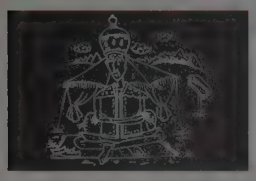
According to new findings, over a thousand years ago, the Ghaytarieh Civilisation flourished in Tehran.

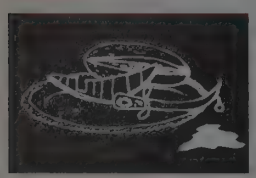


1524 Arg of Tehran is built.

1768 Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, the Shah (King) of Iran, names Tehran as the capital city of Persia. The king, a tribesman by origin, never lives in a building in Tehran, preferring instead tents.



1797 Agha Mohammad Khan is on a military campaign in Shusha in the Karabakh Khanate (in Azerbaijan), when he eats, as legend has it, half a melon or melon slices. He tells his servants to save the rest of the fruit for the morning, warning them he will kill them if they eat a slice. The servants forget, eat melon and assassinate the king before the morning.



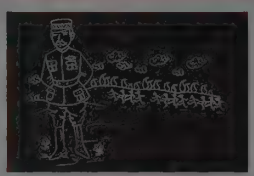
1811 Golestan (Flower Garden) Palace is built within the Arg of Tehran.

1829 The second Qajar King Fath Ali Shah builds *Khabgaah* (Sleeping Building), basically a large hall with a balcony, where the musicians playing for the king are unable to see him copulating with one of his 900 wives.

1835 Prime Minister Ghaem Magham Farahani, a prominent writer and scientist of his time, is killed on the orders of Mohammad Shah, the third Qajar king, who is fearful of Farahani's prominence and popularity.

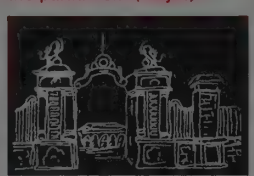
1846 Ghaem Magham's protégé and son of his cook, Amir Kabir, becomes the prime minister to the fourth Qajar king. Amir Kabir modernises Iran and tries to reform the country. He is killed in 1852 on the orders of Nassereddin Shah who is paranoid about the power of the prime minister.

1861 The first organised uniformed law enforcement, the Iran Police, is formed by a Frenchman, Conte de Monte.

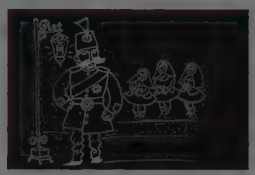


1870 Tekieh Dowlat is a quasitown hall and opera house, where Shi'a passion plays, the *Taziyeh*, are first performed in public.

1870 Baharestan Park is established and renovated in 1907 to become the parliament *(Majlis)*.

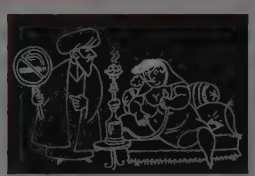


1888 Electricity is first introduced in Tehran's Bab Homayoun and Arg Avenues, for exclusive use in the Shah's palace and adjacent streets.

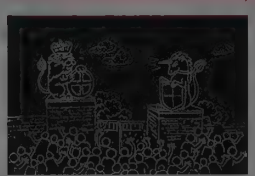


1890 Sepah-Salar Mosque, named after Nassereddin Shah's Foreign Affairs and Commander-in-Chief Mirza Hossein Khan (Sepah Salar), is completed. Mosques define the capital cities of Iran. Before Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz were known for their most beautiful and grand mosques.

1891 The Tobacco Riots are sparked by trade concessions for the purchasing, production, sales and export of Iranian tobacco that Nassereddin Shah grants to Britain's Major Gerald F. Talbot and Regies Tobacco. This act prompts the merchants of the bazaar to seek the aid of the clergy and Grand Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi from Najaf, in Iraq, issues a *fatwa* prohibiting smoking. A nationwide protest against the tobacco concession ensues, which culminates in riots in Tehran after the Shah's unsuccessful attempts to get the *fatwa* annulled by Tehran's leading *mujtahid* (expert in divinity) Mirza Hasan Ashtiani. By 1892, the Shah abolishes tobacco concession.



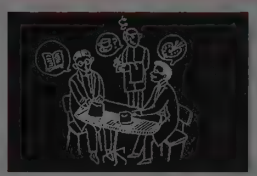
1905 Ten-thousand people stage a sit-in to demand law courts and a parliament, on the grounds of the British Embassy. The street where the embassy is located, Lokhtihaa Street, is also known as 'Naked Street' because of two reasons: people have been mugged there regularly and it is the first street on which women walk without the veil, starting in 1936.



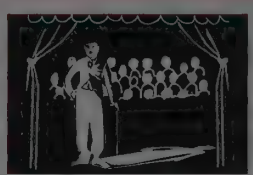
1907 Introduction of a constitution, which limits the absolutist powers of Shahs.

1908 Mohammad Ali Shah, sixth Qajar king, attacks the country's first parliament with cannons and kills many constitutional revolutionaries and journalists to solidify his tyranny.

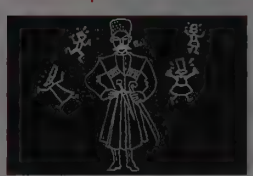
1910 Naderi Café, which eventually becomes the hangout for Tehrani artists and intellectuals, is established on Shah Avenue (now known as Jomhuri (Republic) Avenue).



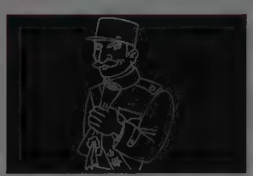
1915–19 Mihan Cinema opens and shows silent films in Hassan Abad Square.



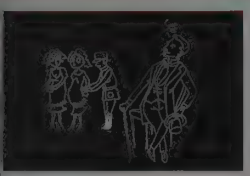
1921, February (3 Efand) Military commander Reza Khan, who is also known by the names Reza Savad Koohi and Reza Khan Mirpanj, seizes Tehran in a coup d'état. In a few days he becomes Reza Khan Sardar Sepah.



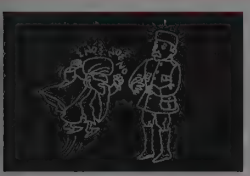
1923 Reza Khan becomes prime minister and forces Ahmad Shah Qajar into exile.



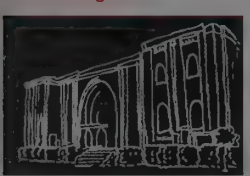
1923 The lashing of two highclass madams, Aziz Kashi and Amirzadeh Khanoom, takes places on the orders of Reza Khan in an attempt to punish the madams' client, Mr Norman, the charge d'affairs of the British Embassy. Reza Khan also wants to impress the clergy with his religious act. After the madams' house is raided by the police, British diplomats Smart and Richman, who are critics of Reza Khan, are recalled to London.



1925 Reza Khan kills many rebels, shuts down newspapers and suppresses his critics. He wants to make Iran a republic but the politicians and clergy stop him.

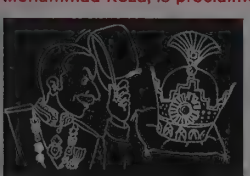


1925 Iran Baastaan (Ancient Iran) Museum on Sepah Avenue (now known as Imam Khomeini Avenue) exhibits the pre-Islamic artefacts by which Reza Shah wants to associate himself with the kings of the Persian kingdom.

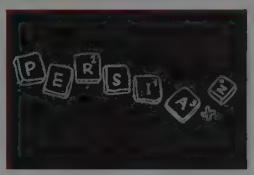


1925 Qasr Prison is established on Jaadeh Shemiran (now Shariati Avenue). All the political prisoners of the time are incarcerated in Qasr Prison and many political activists are killed there.

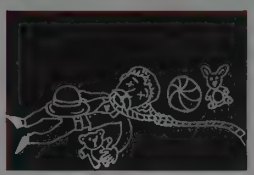
1926 Reza Khan crowned as 'Reza Shah Pahlavi'. The Shah's eldest son, Mohammad Reza, is proclaimed Crown Prince.



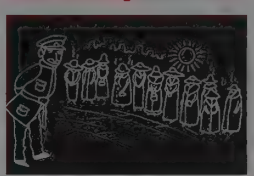
1935 Formerly known as Persia abroad, 'Iran' is adopted as the country's official name.



1935 Public hanging of Asghar Ghatel (Asghar the Murderer), a serial killer of children and reputed paedophile who maintained he was ridding Iran of corrupt elements.

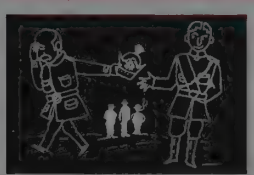


1936, 7 January
Forced unveiling of women takes place by a royal decree. With the women of the royal family and the wives of ministers in attendance, school headmistresses and other prominent women in the country, all unveiled, attend ■ ceremony and speech given by Reza Shah at the men's Teacher Training College on Roosevelt Avenue (now the Faculty of Education on Mofatteh Street). The traditional and religious resist unveiling.

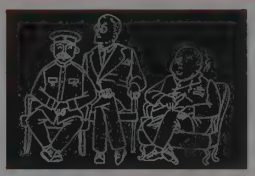


1938 Pars Theatre, the first theatre to show Westernised dramas in Tehran, is established with productions such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence and *Lady Windermere's Fan* by Oscar Wilde.

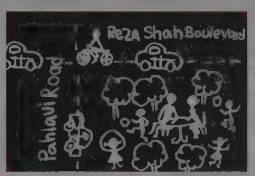
1941 (25 Shahrivar) Reza Shah's pro-Axis allegiance in World War II leads to the Anglo-Russian occupation of Iran and the abdication of the Shah in favour of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.



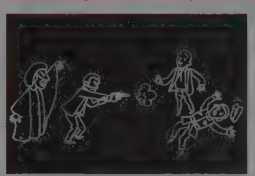
1943 Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt attend the Tehran Conference, the first meeting to discuss World War II held by the three superpowers, during which they recognise Iran and its suffering in the course of the war.



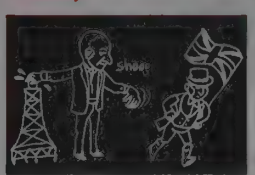
1945 Café Shahrdari, an amusement park and fun fair for children and families, is established at the junction of Reza Shah Boulevard (now Enghelab (Revolution) Avenue) and Pahlavi Road (now Vali Asr Avenue). Café Shahrdari becomes Teatre Shahr in 1970.



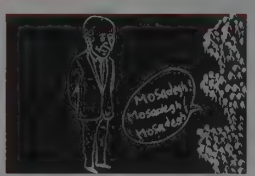
1951 Prime Minister Ali Razmara is assassinated in Tehran by Kahlil Tahmassebi, an Islamic fundamentalist belonging to *Fadayan-e Islam*. After two months, Mohammad Mossadegh becomes prime minister.



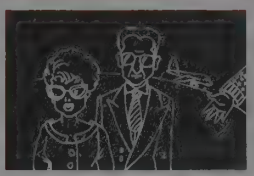
1951, March (29 Esfand)
Parliament votes to nationalise the oil industry, which is dominated by British Petroleum (BP). Britain imposes an embargo and a blockade, which halt oil exports and damage the economy.



1952, July (30 Tir) Thousands of Mossadegh supporters demonstrate in Baharestan Square to have him reinstated as prime minister.

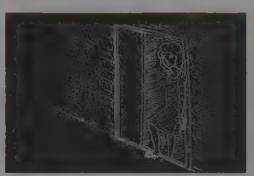


1953, August (28 Mordad)
Mossadegh is overthrown in a coup engineered by the CIA. General Fazlollah Zahedi is installed as prime minister and the Shah returns from five days of self-exile.



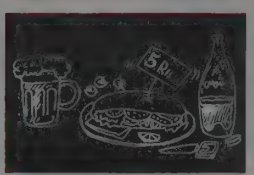
1953, November Students demonstrate against the visit of US vice president Richard Nixon in Tehran University. Three students are shot by government troops.

1954 Shahr-e No (New City) is established in Tehran where brothels are located, barricaded and organised into ■ formal Red Light district with its own police station, clinic and at least two cabarets. The area is burnt to the ground after the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

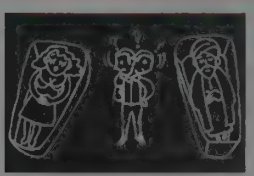


1957 Mehregan Club is established in Lalehzar Avenue and becomes a meeting place for teachers. It becomes prominent when the first parliamentary debates are held in 1959. The president of the club, Mohammad Derakhshesh, becomes the minister of education in 1962.

1960 Bistros start appearing on the streets of Tehran. The most popular item on the menu is a sandwich and ■ beer for 5 rials (10 cents)

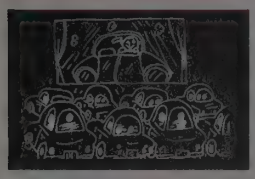


1960 The first million-man attended funerals are held in Tehran. The first one is for popular chanteuse Mahvash in February, the second for Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Boroojerdi, Iranian Shi'a *marja* (object of emulation) who died in March.

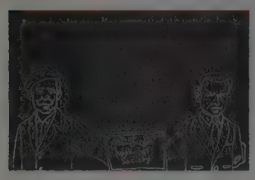


1960, June (15 Khordad)
Ayatollah Khomeini gives a speech critical of the Shah's White Revolution, a programme of land reform and social and economic modernisation, is arrested, sparking demonstrations in Tehran's bazaar and Arg Square. I write my first article as a voluntary reporter for *Etela'at Newspaper* at the age of seventeen.

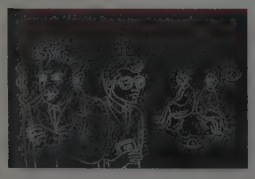
1963 Tehran's first drive-in cinema is established in Tehran Pars, a second popular one is built in Vanak Square.



1964 *Kanoon* Nevisandegan *Iran* (the country's Authors' Society) is established by Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Mahmood Beh Azin. *Kanoon*, the main organisation for dissident authors and intellectuals in Iran, has never been officially recognised before or after the Revolution.

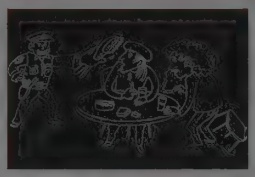


1967 First poetry nights are held at the Shahrdari Club in Hedayat Street. At the time I am the assistant to Ahmad Shamloo, one of the most prominent poets of his generation and editor of *Khoosheh Magazine*. All the poets from different political backgrounds read their poetry together. I see one of the best performances of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Davood Rashidi.



1968 First (and probably last) public gay marriage in Tehran. Bijan Safari and Cyrus Mahvi, two aristocrats hold their wedding ceremony in the Hilton Hotel. The opulent party continues in Mahvi's house in Shemiran district of Tehran.

1970 Tehran police raid the Key Club, a famous nightclub in Darband, and shave the heads of young people including two prominent artists, the painter Hossein Zendehroodi and the director of Tehran Symphony Farhad Meshkat. The next day the Shah fires police chief General Mobasser.

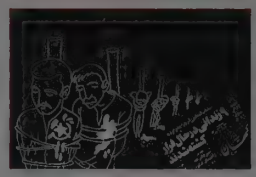


1970 Evin Prison, established in Sa'adatabad area of Tehran, is specifically designed for political prisoners, and based on modern prison construction. I eventually spend six months in Evin from 25 July 1999 until February 2000. What strikes me the most, besides a harrowing experience of forty days in solitary confinement, is how Western the prison is. Nothing about the prison derives from Middle Eastern or Iranian traditions. Everything seems to have been 'Made in America'.

1971, October The monument Shahyad (Remembrance of the Shahs) is inaugurated to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. It is designed by University of Tehran fine arts graduate Hossein Amanat and constructed on land that is considered one of the gates to the city. After the Revolution, it is renamed Azadi (Freedom) Monument in honour of the Revolution.

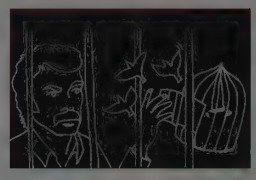
1973 *In Hafteh* (This Week) magazine, the Iranian version of *Playboy*, is published by Javad Alamir Davaloo, *Le Monde's* correspondent in Tehran. After twenty issues it is attacked and shutdown by *Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation* (MKO), ■ socialist-Islamic guerrilla group.

1975 Bijan Jazani and six other guerrilla leaders who fought against the Shah's regime are killed in Evin Prison. The official news is that they are shot while escaping from prison.

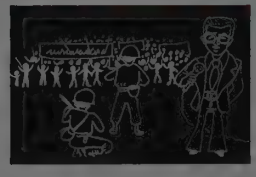


1977 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art opens with a modern collection of paintings including Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup series and Francis Bacon's triptych. The museum is the brainchild of Empress Farah Pahlavi, the first Iranian empress born in Tehran. She is also the first woman to have a statue of herself erected in an Islamic country. Created by the sculptor Parviz Tanavoli and displayed in Niavaran Park next to the Shah's palace, it becomes the subject of much controversy.

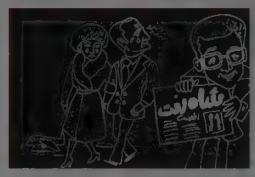
1977 The poetry night, at the Goethe Institute, includes an important event: the speech of political activist Saeid Soltanpour recently released from Evin Prison. Soltanpour openly criticises the Shah's government and asks for more freedom of speech in Iran. The speech is like an outburst of an energy, which has been suppressed for twenty-five years since the 1953 coup. Saeid is executed in 1983 by the Islamic authorities because he is a Marxist.



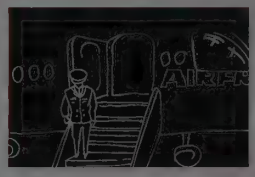
1978, September (17 Shahrivar) The Shah's policies alienate the clergy and his authoritarian rule leads to unrest, strikes and mass demonstrations. Martial law is imposed in eleven cities. Clashes in Tehran's Jaleh Square result in hundreds of injured protestors. Rumours place the death toll at 3,000 but later investigative journalist Emadeddin Baghi establishes that ninety were killed. On my last radio programme to express my anger, I play banned music such as Iranian singer Farhad's 'Jomeh' (Friday) song. The chorus of the song is: 'On Fridays blood is pouring from the sky. Blood pours in place of the rain.'



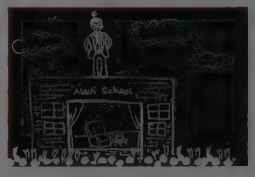
1979, 16 January (26 Day)
As the political situation deteriorates, the Shah and his family are forced into exile. They leave on the Shah's personal jet, Shahbaz, a 737 Boeing. The plane's pilot Colonel Behzad Moezi returns the plane to Iran, after dropping the Shah in Aswan, Egypt, and later joins the *Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation* (MKO). Because of his political affiliation, he is grounded by the Islamic authorities. Only after the intercession of the first president of Iran, Abolhassan Banisadr, he is reinstated and flies more combat missions than any other pilot during the Iran-Iraq War. In 1981, he flies the fleeing Banisadr and MKO leader Masoud Rajavi to exile in Paris. I don't go to the airport because only reporters for government media are allowed to attend the Shah's departure ceremony. The country is elated. I have never seen or reported on so much joy in my life. Now, I don't think there was any reason to be joyful.



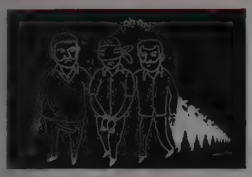
1979, 1 February (12 Bahman) Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returns to Iran following fourteen years of exile in Iraq and France for opposing the regime. Like most reporters in Iran, I am on strike but go back to work to report the return of the Ayatollah live on television. I am beaten by the Imperial Guard stationed at Iranian National Television. After they shut down the broadcast I rush to central Tehran to see the Ayatollah close up for myself.



1979, 12 February (22 Bahman) I am on the rooftop of Alavi School where Ayatollah Khomeini and his transitional government are based. It is also in the same school, on the roof, that the revolutionaries execute four of the military commanders of the Shah's regime. I know at the time that this day, which becomes known as 'the Victory of the Revolution' is like no other. But I could never imagine the immensity of what is to come.

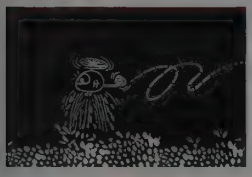


1979, November Islamic militants take fifty-two Americans hostage inside the US embassy on Takhteh Jamshid Avenue. They demand the extradition of the Shah – in the US at the time for cancer treatment – to face trial in Iran.

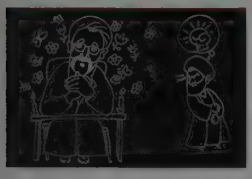


1980, 22 September
Iran–Iraq War starts with the bombardment of Tehran. It is around noon, and as far as I remember, eight bombs are dropped. Seven of them hit different airports in Tehran and one a house on Nonahallan Street close to Zafar Avenue.

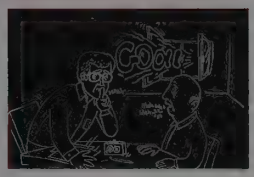
1989, 3 June One year after accepting a ceasefire with Iraq, Ayatollah Khomeini dies. The next day, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is appointed as the new Supreme Leader. I remember it being an unbearably hot day with three million people overwhelmed with grief on the streets. Helicopters pour water on them to keep them cool. I feel that I am witnessing a historic event: the burial of an Iranian leader in his homeland some ninety years after Nassereddin Shah Qajar was buried in Rey.



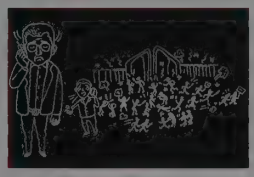
1997, May (2 Khordad)
Mohammad Khatami wins the presidential election with 70 percent of the vote, beating Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, the candidate favoured by the conservative ruling elite.



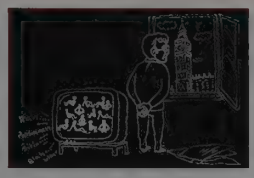
1997, November Iran beat Australia and qualify for 1998 Football World Cup in France. Khodadad Azizi scores the winning goal. At the time I am interviewing someone when I hear the chants 'Khodadad, Khodadad.' I know something important has happened and I am unable to carry on with the interview. Immediately after the game the whole city and country celebrates the victory. I think after Khatami's election, people want to celebrate it publicly. The Australia game gives them the perfect excuse.



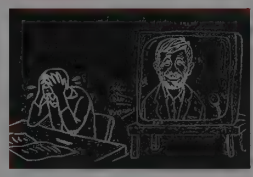
1999, July (18 Tir)
Pro-democracy students at Tehran University demonstrate following the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salaam*. Clashes with security forces leads to six days of unrest and the arrest of more than 1,000 students. Someone calls me from the main Tehran University dormitory, the scene of the riots, and asks me to deliver a speech there. I decline, saying, 'I'm a journalist, not a revolutionary. I took part in a revolution once and that's enough.'



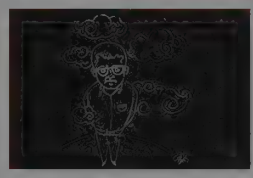
2004, February Sit-in by reformist MPs after conservatives regain control of parliament. Thousands of reformist candidates are disqualified from standing in the elections by the hardline Council of Guardians. By then I am already in exile in London. I have already spent six months in Evin and after I am released I am sentenced to nineteen months imprisonment *in absentia*. The main reason for my imprisonment is an article, which is deemed defamatory because it advises high-ranking Iranian officials not to support the hardliners against the reformists.



2005, June Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran's ultra-conservative mayor, wins in the second round of presidential elections, defeating cleric and former President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. The night before the elections I really get worried. Even though I try to stay away from political activities I appear on Voice of America Television, which is the mouthpiece of Bush government, and ask my countrymen not to vote for Ahmadinejad. I am afraid that a radical government may carry out irreversible policies, which will damage the country for many years to come. Obviously I lose and all my worries become realities. Yet, I trust in my people's collective wisdom. I know that reason and poetry will eventually triumph in the face of radical idealism and prejudice.



2008 I long to return home.



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Policewomen graduates abseiling down a building in Tehran, photograph by Abbas Kowsari, 2005

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Tehran is a city of contradictions. Its swollen population of fourteen million and upwards contains the religious, the irreligious and the simply indifferent. Located on a major fault line, it is nevertheless in the throes of a construction boom. While regular demonstrations after Friday prayers call for 'the death of Great Satan America', Iranians of all ages enjoy a long-standing love affair with Western luxury brands. Among the hip and fashionable, the veil has morphed from cover-up to come-on, and young women in colourful scarves and makeup are increasingly targeted by the female officers of the Special Guidance Patrols.

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